May - June, 1970 60¢ MAC

WORLDS OF if SCIENCE FICTION

NOVELETTE

THE PIECEMAKERS

Keith Laumer

if the magazine of alternatives

THE REALITY TRIP

Robert Silverberg

ZON

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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

May-June 1970
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Issue 148

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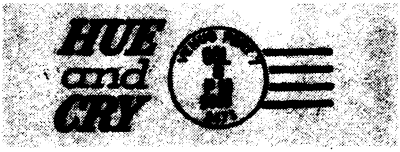


Readers write—and wrong!

CONFESSION: I seem to have walked through a door without bothering to see if it was open. But I got through and met the most delightful man on the other side.

Here he is.

Dear Ejler:

Permit me to point out an error in your letter column in IF # 146 (Mar. 1970), p. 155, where you say "the Caucasoids are vastly outnumbered." The current anthropological figures for the earth's population break down thus: Caucasoids 60%, Mongoloids 30%, Negroids 10%. The other races (Bushmen, Australoids, Polynesians, &c.) not classifiable under any of those 3 heads total less than 1%. The Caucasoids, however, consist of about half "light" Caucasoids, e.g. Europeans, North Africans, & their descendants, and half "dark" Caucasoids from southern Asia, i.e. India and the adjacent lands. Some of these are pretty black, but in all traits other than pigmentation (hair, facial contours, blood groups, &c.) they are just as Caucasoid as thou and I.

Kaor,
L. Sprague de Camp

I cannot speak for thee but I'm at least as much Finn as Swedish and Finns (and Magyars) in most ethnological tables I've seen are listed as Asians. Caucasoids, however, are defined as "resembling or allied to" Caucasians and I both resemble and am allied to.

We're in an interesting area here. You can get into some heatedly erudite arguments in Finland about the Finno-Asian bit and at least one eleventh or twelfth-century European scholar (not Finnish) wrote extensively and proved at least to his own satisfaction that the Finns were one of the lost tribes of Israel. Columbia University Library stacks devote a shelf as long as a lifetime to the Finno-Hungarian language and migrations, which seemed to me an awful lot of bother.

How much of established ethnology is a matter of semantics, arbitrary classification and occasional wishful thinking? The question—and answer—are honest: I really don't know. One tabulation I recently saw lists Latins as extinct but admits the existence of some "Latin-like" peoples. Blond but otherwise Negroid hair has shown persistence in Norway. Caused speculation that, as I remember, tried but never really got off the ground.

Thanks for the correction. I was sloppy.

Ejler Jakobsson, meet Ejler Jakobsson:

In the November, 1969, Galaxy, Ejler Jakobsson, editor, writes, (p. 143): "Any . . . adman knows that he can make a rose smell like a stinkweed by giving it a new name. Let's stop pol-

luting our brains."

In the same issue, p. 135, the blurb-writer (if not Jakobsson, Jakobsson is nonetheless accountable) writes: "Frank [Herbert] is Higher Education editor for the Seattle Post-Intelligence. Or did he say Riot Editor?"

Sure. Higher education . . . students . . . political action (demonstrations & such) . . . riot (which chain of implications says something about the value judgments of the man who wrote that blurb.)

Pollution. Right on. Someone needs an emission-control device.

peace,brother
J.M. Graetz
Cambridge, Mass.

The passage you quote is from *Galaxy Stars*, not from a blurb, and the words are Frank Herbert's in a phone interview. What I wrote on the editor's page was complete on that page. I don't know from where you pulled in your series of implications.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I have met many people in Calgary who read science fiction. Several of the 350,000 persons resident here have expressed interest in a science fiction group, provided that such an organization already existed. To date such a group has not been formed.

One reader pointed out, "Why have a science fiction society?" Indeed that is the problem. I would like to have a solution to it. When readers bump into each other at the bookstore they often have a very pleasant discussion of authors, books, favorite magazines, etc. It might be nice to hold these conversations at more regular intervals in better surroundings.

It is possible for a large crowd to attend the first meeting. But what happens then? What do science fiction groups DO that would justify meeting once a month? What advantages would be gained by being a member? Is it really worthwhile to have a group like this?

I would like to know since there must be some reasonable excuse to form a group in Calgary.

If you have any suggestions concerning the creation and maintenance of this type of society I would be pleased to hear from you. I would appreciate it if you could also forward my request to anyone you believe could be of help.

Please accept my thanks in advance for any ideas you have on the situation.

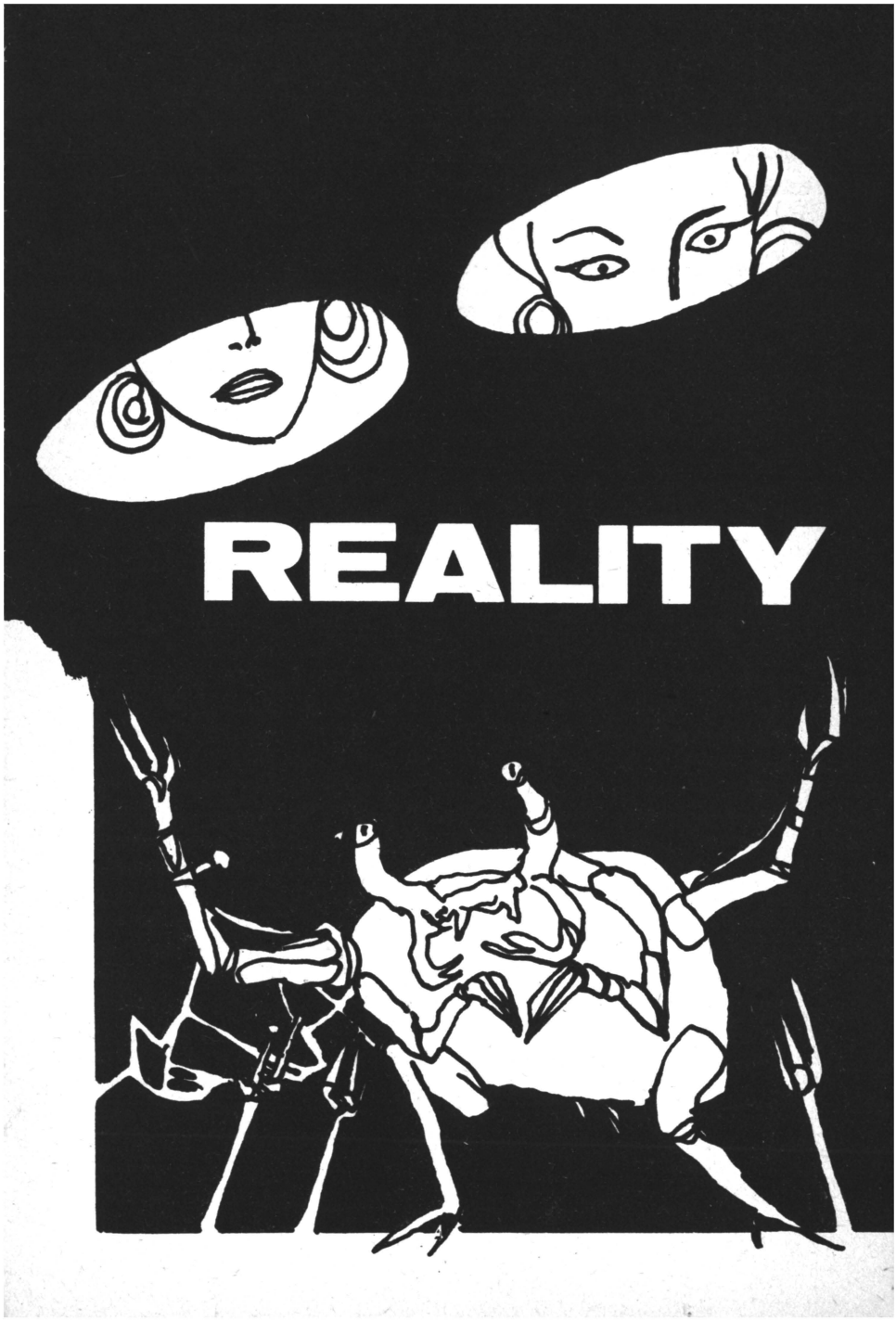
Sincerely,
Brian Hval
Alberta, Canada

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Many thanks for the improvements in Galaxy *and* If, *including the printing method and the artwork. The quality of the stories has stayed the same, with the best recent one being "Half Past Human."*

The distribution of your magazines has greatly improved since the change of ownership. Originally, they arrived here from six to nine weeks late—they

(Please turn to page 158)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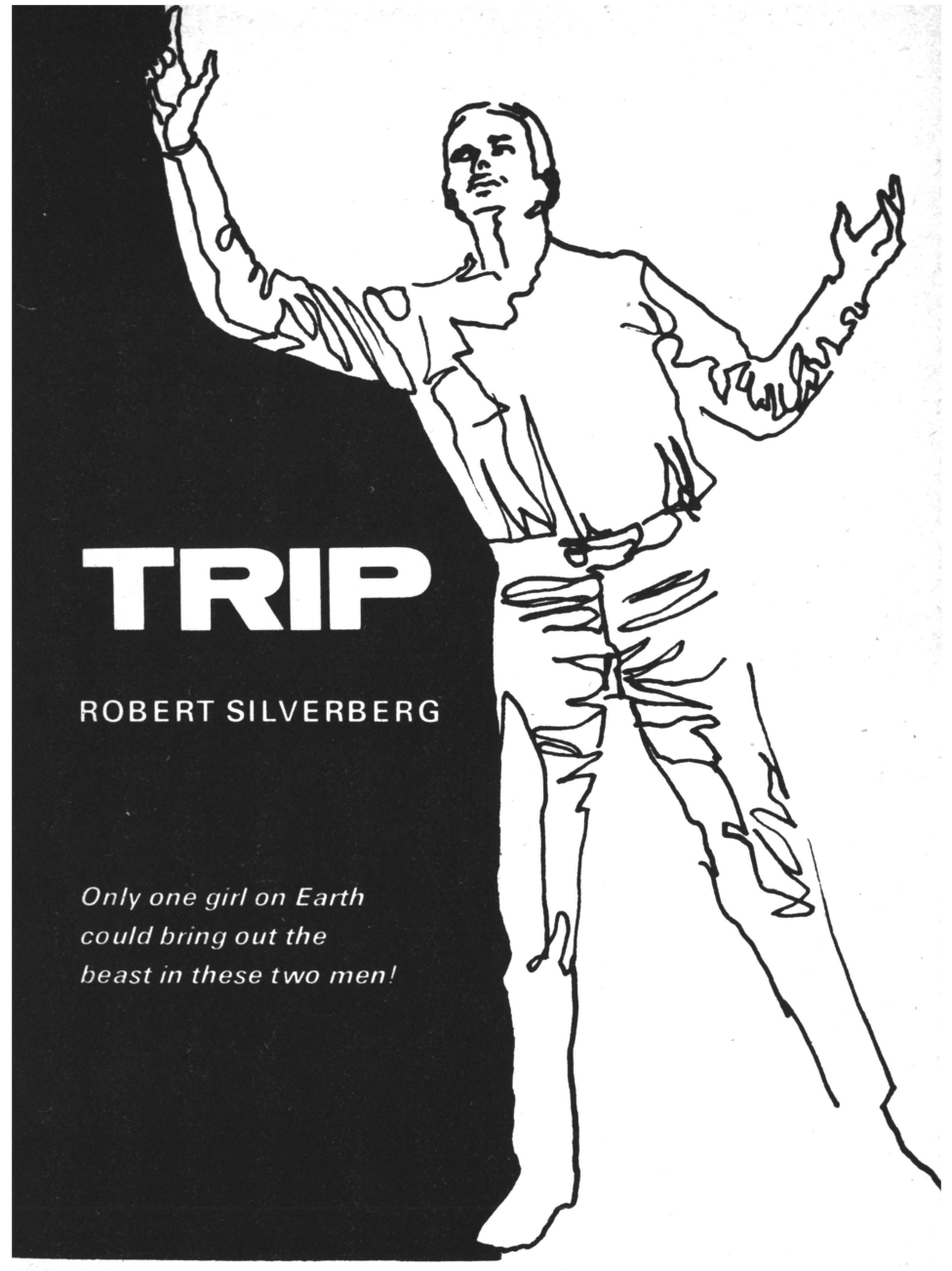


TRIP

ROBERT SILVERBERG

Only one girl on Earth
could bring out the
beast in these two men!

I

I AM a redemption project for her. She lives on my floor of the hotel, a dozen rooms down the hall: a lady poet, private income. No, that makes her sound too old, a middle-aged eccentric. Actually she is no more than thirty. Taller than I am, with long kinky brown hair and a sharp, bony nose that has a bump on the bridge. Eyes are very glossy. A studied raggedness about her dress—carefully chosen shabby clothes. I am in no position really to judge the sexual attractiveness of Earthfolk but I gather from remarks made by men living here that she is not considered good-looking. I pass her often on my way to my room. She smiles fiercely at me. Saying to herself, no doubt, *You poor lonely man. Let me help you bear the burden of your unhappy life. Let me show you the meaning of love, for I, too, know what it is like to be alone...*

Or words to that effect. She's never actually said any such thing. But her intentions are transparent. When she sees me a kind of hunger comes into her eyes, part maternal, part (I guess) sexual, and her face takes on a wild crazy intensity.

Her name is Elizabeth Cooke.

"Are you fond of poetry, Mr. Knecht?" she asked me this morning as we creaked upward together in the ancient elevator.

An hour later she knocked at my door. "Something for you to read," she said. "I wrote them." A sheaf of large yellow sheets stapled at the top—poems printed in smeary blue mimeography. *The Reality Trip*, the collection was headed. *Limited Edition: 125 Copies*. "You can keep it if you like," she explained. "I've got lots more."

She was wearing bright corduroy slacks and a flimsy pink shawl through which her breasts plainly showed. Small tapering breasts, not very functional-looking. When she saw me studying them her nostrils flared momentarily and she blinked her eyes three times swiftly. Tokens of lust?

I read the poems. Is it fair for me to offer judgment on them? Even though I've lived on this planet eleven of its years, even though my command of colloquial English is quite good, do I really comprehend the inner life of poetry? I thought they were all rather bad. Earnest, plodding poems, capturing what they call slices of life. The world around her, the cruel, brutal, unloving city. Lamenting the barriers between people. The title poem began:

> *He was on the reality trip. Big black man, bloodshot eyes, bad teeth. Eisenhower jacket, frayed. Smell of cheap wine. I guess a knife in his pocket. Looked at me mean. Criminal record. Rape, child-beating, possession of drugs. In his head saying, slavemistress*

bitch, and me in my head saying, black brother, let's freak in together, let's trip on love—

And so forth. Warm, direct emotion—but is the urge to love all wounded things a sufficient center for poetry? I don't know. I did put her poems through the scanner and transmit them to Homeworld, although I doubt they'll learn much from them about Earth. It would flatter Elizabeth to know that while she has few readers here, she has acquired some ninety light-years away. But of course I can't tell her that.

She came back a short while ago.

"Did you like them?" she asked.

"Very much. You have sympathy for those who suffer."

I think she expected me to invite her in. I was careful not to look at her breasts this time.

THE hotel is on West 23rd Street. It must be over a hundred years old—the facade is practically baroque and the interior shows a kind of genteel decay. The place has a bohemian tradition. Most of its guests are permanent residents and many of them are artists, novelists, playwrights and such. I have lived here nine years. I know a number of the residents by name and they me—but I have discouraged any real intimacy, naturally, everyone has respected that choice. I do not invite others into my room. Sometimes I let myself be invited to visit theirs, since one of my responsibilities on this world is to get to know something of the way Earthfolk live and think. Elizabeth is the first to attempt to cross the invisible barrier of privacy I surround myself with. I'm not sure how I'll handle that. She moved in about three years ago. Her attentions became noticeable perhaps ten months back and for the last five or six weeks she's been a great nuisance. Some kind of confrontation is inevitable: either I must tell her to leave me alone, or I will find myself drawn into a situation impossible to tolerate. Perhaps she'll find someone else to feel even sorrier for, before it comes to that.

My daily routine rarely varies. I rise at seven. First Feeding. Then I clean my skin (my outer one, the Earthskin, I mean) and dress. From eight to ten I transmit data to Homeworld. Then I go out for the morning field trip: talking to people, buying newspapers, often some library research. At one I return to my room. Second Feeding. I transmit data from two to five. Out again, perhaps to the theater, to a motion picture, to a political meeting. I must soak up the flavor of this planet. Often to saloons—I am equipped for ingesting alcohol, though of course I must get rid of it before it has been in my body very long—and I drink and listen and sometimes argue. At midnight

back to my room. Third Feeding. Transmit data from one to four in the morning. Then three hours of sleep and at seven the cycle begins anew. It is a comforting schedule. I don't know how many agents Homeworld has on Earth but I like to think that I'm one of the most diligent and useful. I miss very little. I've done good service and, as they say here, hard work is its own reward. I won't deny that I hate the physical discomfort of it and frequently give way to real despair over my isolation from my own kind. Sometimes I even think of asking for a transfer to Homeworld. But what would become of me there? What services could I perform? I have shaped my life to one end: that of dwelling among the Earthfolk and reporting on their ways. If I give that up, I am nothing.

OF COURSE there is the physical pain. Which is considerable.

The gravitational pull of Earth is almost twice that of Homeworld. It makes for a leaden life for me. My inner organs always sagging against the lower rim of my carapace. My muscles cracking with strain. Every movement a willed effort. My heart in constant protest. In my eleven years I have, as one might expect, adapted somewhat to the conditions—I have toughened, I have thickened. I suspect that if I were transported instantly to Homeworld now I would be quite giddy, baffled by the lightness of everything. I would leap and soar and stumble and might even miss this crushing pull of Earth. Yet I doubt that. I suffer here; at all times the weight oppresses me. Not to sound too self-pitying about it. I knew the conditions in advance. I was placed in simulated Earth gravity when I volunteered and was given a chance to withdraw and I decided to go anyway. Not realizing that a week under double gravity is not the same thing as a lifetime. I could always have stepped out of the simulation chamber. Not here. The eternal drag on every molecule of me. The pressure. My flesh is always in mourning.

And the outer body I must wear. This cunning disguise. Forever to be swaddled in thick masses of synthetic flesh, smothering me, engulfing me. The soft slippery slap of it against the self within. The elaborate framework that holds it erect, by which I make it move—a forest of struts and braces and servoactuators and cables, in the midst of which I must unendingly huddle, atop my little platform in the gut. Adopting one or another of various uncomfortable positions, constantly shifting and squirming, now jabbing myself on some awkardly placed projection, now trying to make my inflexible body flexibly to bend. Seeing the world by periscope through me-

chanical eyes. Enwombed in this mountain of meat. It is a clever thing—it must look convincingly human, since no one has ever doubted me and it ages ever so slightly from year to year, graying a bit at the temples, thickening a bit at the paunch. It walks. It talks. It takes in food and drink when it has to. (And deposits them in a removable pouch near my leftmost arm.) And I within it. The hidden chessplayer. The invisible rider. If I dared I would periodically strip myself of this cloak of flesh and crawl around my room in my own guise. But it is forbidden. Eleven years now and I have not been outside my protoplasmic housing. I feel sometimes that it has come to adhere to me, that it is by now a part of me.

In order to eat I must unseal it at the middle, a process that takes many minutes. Three times a day I unbutton myself so that I can stuff the food concentrates into my true gullet. Faulty design, I call that. They could just as easily have arranged it so I could pop the food into my Earthmouth and have it land in my own digestive tract. I suppose the newer models have that. Excretion is just as troublesome for me—I unseal, reach in, remove the cubes of waste, seal my skin again. Down the toilet with them. A nuisance.

And the loneliness! To look at the stars and know Homeworld is out there somewhere! To think of all the others, mating, chanting, dividing, abstracting, while I live out my days in this crumbling hotel on an alien planet, tugged down by gravity and locked within a cramped counterfeit body—always alone, always pretending that I am not what I am and that I am what I am not, spying, questioning, recording, reporting, coping with the misery of solitude, hunting for the comforts of philosophy.

In all of this there is only one real consolation, aside, that is, from the pleasure of knowing that I am of service to Homeworld. The atmosphere of New York City grows grimier every year. The streets are full of crude vehicles belching undigested hydrocarbons. To the Earthfolk this stuff is pollution and they mutter worriedly about it. To me it is joy. It is the only touch of Homeworld here, that sweet soup of organic compounds adrift in the air. It intoxicates me. I walk down the street breathing deeply, sucking the good molecules through my false nostrils to my authentic lungs. The natives must think I'm insane. Tripping on auto exhaust! Can I get arrested for overenthusiastic public breathing? Will they pull me in for a mental checkup?

Elizabeth Cooke continues to waft wistful attentions at me. Smiles in the hallway. Hopeful gleam of the eyes.

"Perhaps we can have dinner together some night soon, Mr. Knecht. I know we'd have so much to talk about. And maybe you'd like to see the new poems I've been doing."

She is trembling. Eyelids flickering tensely; head held rigid on long neck. I know she sometimes has men in her room, so it can't be out of loneliness or frustration that she's cultivating me. And I doubt that she's sexually attracted to my outer self. I believe I'm being accurate when I say that women don't consider me sexually magnetic. No, she loves me because she pities me. The sad, shy bachelor at the end of the hall, dear unhappy Mr. Knecht—can I bring some brightness into his dreary life? And so forth. I think that's how it is. Will I be able to go on avoiding her? Perhaps I should move to another part of the city. But I've lived here for so long; I've grown accustomed to this hotel. Its easy ways do much to compensate for the hardships of my post. And my familiar room. The huge many-paned window; the cracked green floor tiles in the bathroom; the lumpy patterns of replastering on the wall above my bed. The high ceiling, the funny chandelier. Things that I love. But of course I can't let her try to start an affair with me. We are supposed to observe Earthfolk, not to get involved with them. Our disguise is not that difficult to penetrate at close range. I must keep her away somehow. Or flee.

II

INCREDIBLE! There is another of us in this very hotel.

As I learned through accident. At one this afternoon, returning from my morning travels: Elizabeth in the lobby, as though lying in wait for me, chatting with the manager. Rides up with me in the elevator. Her eyes looking into mine.

"Sometimes I think you're afraid of me," she begins. "You mustn't be. That's the great tragedy of human life—people shut themselves up behind walls of fear and never let anyone through, anyone who might care about them and be warm to them. You've got no reason to be afraid of me."

I do but how to explain that to her? To sidestep prolonged conversation and possible entanglement I get off the elevator one floor below the right one. Let her think I'm visiting a friend. Or a mistress. I walk slowly down the hall to the stairs, using up time, waiting so she will be in her room before I go up. A maid bustles by me. She thrusts her key into a door on the left: a rare *faux pas* for the usually competent help here, she

forgets to knock before going in to make up the room. The door opens and the occupant, inside, stands revealed. A stocky, muscular man, naked to the waist.

"Oh, excuse me," the maid gasps and backs out, shutting the door.

But I have seen. My eyes are quick. The hairy chest is split, a dark gash three inches wide and some eleven inches long, beginning between the nipples and going past the navel. Visible within is the black shiny surface of a Homeworld carapace. My countryman, opening up for Second Feeding. Dazed, numbed, I stagger to the stairs and pull myself step by leaden step to my floor. No sign of Elizabeth. I stumble into my room and throw the bolt. Another of us here? Well, why not? I'm not the only one. There may be hundreds in New York alone. But in the same hotel? I remember now, I've seen him occasionally—a silent, dour man, tense, hunted-looking, unsociable. No doubt I appear the same way to others. Keep the world at a distance. I don't know his name or what he is supposed to do for a living.

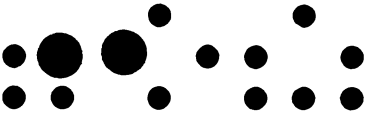
We are forbidden to make contact with fellow Homeworlders except in case of extreme emergency. Isolation is a necessary condition of our employment. I may not introduce myself to him —I may not seek his friendship. It is worse now for me, knowing that he is here, than when I was entirely alone. The things we could reminisce about! The friends we might have in common! We could reinforce one another's endurance of the gravity, the discomfort of our disguises, the vile climate. But no. I must pretend I know nothing. The rules. The harsh, unbending rules. I to go about my business, he his; if we meet, no hint of my knowledge must pass.

So be it. I will honor my vows. But it may be difficult.

He goes by the name of Swanson. Been living in the hotel eighteen months—a musician of some sort, according to the manager.

"A very peculiar man. Keeps to himself. No small talk, never smiles. Defends his privacy. The other day a maid barged into his room without knocking and I thought he'd sue. Well, we get all sorts here."

The manager thinks my Homeworlder may actually be a member of one of the old European royal families, living in exile. Or something similarly romantic. The manager would be surprised.



I defend my privacy too. From Elizabeth, another assault on it.

In the hall outside my room.

"My new poems," she said. "In case you're interested." And then: "Can I come in? I'd read them to you. I love reading out loud." And: "Please don't always seem so terribly afraid of me. I don't bite, David. Really I don't. I'm quite gentle."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." Anger, now, lurking in her shiny eyes, her thin taut lips. "If you want me to leave you alone—say so, I will. But I want you to know how cruel you're being. I don't demand anything from you. I'm just offering some friendship. And you're refusing. Do I have a bad smell? Am I so ugly? Is it my poems you hate and you're afraid to tell me?"

"Elizabeth—"

"We're only on this world such a short time. Why can't we be kinder to each other while we are? To love, to share, to open up. The reality trip. Communication, soul to soul." Her tone changed. An artful shading. "For all I know, women turn you off. I wouldn't put anybody down for that. We've all got our ways. But it doesn't have to be a sexual thing, you and me. Just talk. Like, opening the channels. Please? Say no and I'll never bother you again, but don't say no, please. That's like shutting a door on life, David. And when you do that you start to die."

Persistent. I should tell her to go to hell. But there is the loneliness. There is her obvious sincerity. Her warmth, her eagerness to pull me from my lunar isolation. Can there be harm in it? Knowing that Swanson is nearby, so close yet sealed from me by iron commandments, has intensified my sense of being alone. I can risk letting Elizabeth get closer to me. It will make her happy. It may make me happy. It could even yield information valuable to Homeworld. Of course I must still maintain certain barriers.

"I don't mean to be unfriendly. I think you've misunderstood Elizabeth. I haven't really been rejecting you. Come in. Do come in."

Stunned, she enters my room. The first guest ever. My few books, my modest furnishings, the ultrawave transmitter impenetrably disguised as a piece of sculpture.

She sits. Skirt far above the knees. Good legs, if I understand the criteria of quality correctly. I am determined to allow no sexual overtures. If she tries anything I'll resort to—I don't know—hysteria.

"Read me your new poems," I say.

She opens her portfolio. Reads.

In the midst of the hipster night of doubt and Emptiness, when the bad-trip god came to me with Cold hands, I looked up and shouted yes at the Stars. And yes and yes

again. I groove on yes; The devil grooves on no. And I waited for you to Say yes, and at last you did. And the world said The stars said the trees said the grass said the Sky said the streets said yes and yes and yes—

She is ecstatic. Her face is flushed. Her eyes are joyous. She has broken through to me. After two hours, when it becomes obvious that I am not going to ask her to go to bed with me, she leaves. Not to wear out her welcome.

"I'm so glad I was wrong about you, David," she whispers. "I couldn't believe you were really a life-denier. And you're not."

Ecstatic.

I AM getting into very deep water.

We spend an hour or two together every night. Sometimes in my room, sometimes in hers. Usually she comes to me but now and then, to be polite, I seek her out after Third Feeding. By now I've read all her poetry; we talk instead of the arts in general, politics, racial problems. She has a lively, well-stocked, disorderly mind. Though she probes constantly for information about me, she realizes how sensitive I am and quickly withdraws when I parry her. Asking about my work: I reply vaguely that I'm doing research for a book and when I don't amplify she drops it, though she tries again, gently, a few nights later.

She drinks a lot of wine and offers it to me. I nurse one glass through the whole visit. Often she suggests we go out together for dinner. I explain that I have digestive problems and prefer to eat alone. She takes this in good grace but immediately resolves to help me overcome those problems. Soon she is asking me to eat with her again. There is an excellent Spanish restaurant right in the hotel, she says. She drops troublesome questions. Where was I born? Did I go to college? Do I have family somewhere? Have I ever been married? Have I published any of my writings? I improvise evasions. Nothing difficult about that, except that never before have I allowed anyone on Earth such sustained contact with me, so prolonged an opportunity to find inconsistencies in my pretended identity. What if she sees through?

And sex. Her invitations grow less subtle. She seems to think that we ought to be having a sexual relationship simply because we've become such good friends. Not a matter of passion as much as one of communication—we talk, sometimes we take walks together, we should do *that* together too. But of course it's impossible. I have the external organs but not the capacity to use them. Wouldn't want her touching my false skin in any case. How to deflect her? If I

declare myself impotent she'll demand a chance to try to cure me. If I pretend homosexuality she'll start some kind of straightening therapy. If I simply say she doesn't turn me on physically she'll be hurt. The sexual thing is a challenge to her, as merely getting me to talk with her once was. She often wears the transparent pink shawl that reveals her breasts. Her skirts are hip-high. She doses herself with aphrodisiac perfumes. She grazes my body with hers whenever opportunity arises.

The tension mounts. She is determined to have me.

I have said nothing about her in my reports to Homeworld. Though I do transmit some of the psychological data I have gathered by observing her.

"Could you ever admit you were in love with me?" she asked tonight.

And she asked, "Doesn't it hurt to repress your feelings all the time? To sit there locked up inside yourself like a prisoner?"

And: "There's a physical side of life too, David. I don't mind so much the damage you're doing to me by ignoring it. But I worry about the damage you're doing to you."

Crossing her legs. Hiking her skirt even higher.

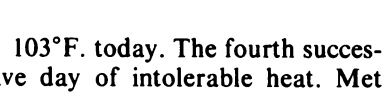
We are heading toward a crisis. I should never have let this begin. A torrid summer has descended on the city and in hot weather my nervous system is always at the edge of eruption. She may push me too far. I might ruin everything. I should apply for transfer to Homeworld before I cause trouble. Maybe I should confer with Swanson. I think what is happening now qualifies as an emergency.

Elizabeth stayed past midnight tonight. I had to ask her finally to leave: work to do. An hour later she pushed an envelope under my door.

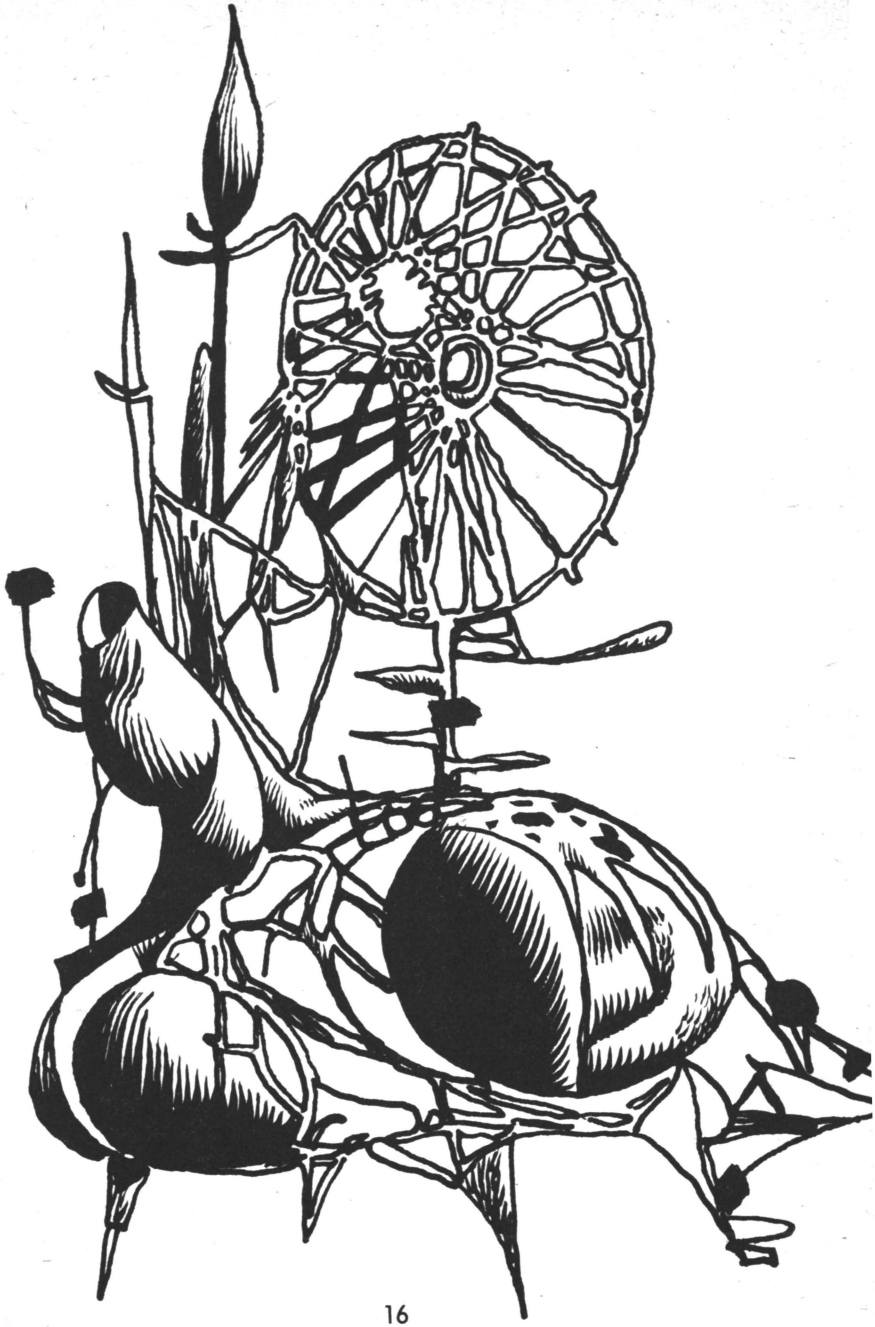
Newest poems. Love poems. In a shaky hand.

> *David: You mean so much to me. You mean the stars and nebulas. Can't you let me show my love? Can't you accept happiness? Think about it. I adore you.*

What have I started?



103°F. today. The fourth successive day of intolerable heat. Met Swanson in the elevator at lunchtime, nearly blurted the truth about myself to him. I must be more careful. But my control is slipping. Last night in the worst of the heat I was tempted to strip off my disguise. I could no longer stand being locked in here, pivoting and ducking to avoid all the machinery festooned about me.



Resisted the temptation just barely. Somehow I am more sensitive to the gravity too. I have the illusion that my carapace is developing cracks. Almost collapsed in the street this afternoon. All I need: heat exhaustion, whisked off to the hospital, routine fluoroscope exam.

You have a very odd skeletal structure, Mr. Knecht. . .

Indeed. Dissecting me, next, with three thousand medical students looking on. And then the United Nations called in. Menace from outer space. Yes. I must be more careful. I must be more careful. I must be more . . .

III

NOW I've done it. Eleven years of faithful service destroyed in a single wild moment. Violation of the Fundamental Rule. I hardly believe it. How was it possible that I—that I—with my respect for my responsibilities—that I could have—even considered, let alone actually done—

But the weather was terribly hot. The third week of the heat wave. I was stifling inside my false body. And the gravity—was New York having a gravity wave too? That terrible pull, worse than ever. Bending my internal organs out of shape. Elizabeth a tremendous annoyance, passionate, emotional, teary, poetic, giving me no rest, pleading for me to burn with

a brighter flame. Declaring her love in sonnets, in rambling hip epics, in *haiku*. Spending two hours in my room, crouched at my feet, murmuring about the hidden beauty of my soul.

"Open yourself and let love come in," she whispered. "It's like giving yourself to God. Making a commitment, breaking down all walls. Why not? For love's sake, David, why not?"

I couldn't tell her why not and she went away. But about midnight she was back knocking at my door. I let her in. She wore an ankle-length silk housecoat, gleaming, threadbare.

"I'm stoned," she said hoarsely, voice an octave too deep. "I had to bust three joints to get up the nerve. But here I am. David, I'm sick of making the turnoff trip. We've been so wonderfully close and then you won't go the last stretch of the way." A cascade of giggles. "Tonight you will. Don't fail me. Darling."

Drops the housecoat. Naked underneath it. Narrow waist, bony hips, long legs, thin thighs, blue veins crossing her breasts. Her hair wild and kinky. A sorceress. A seeress. Berserk. Approaching me, eyes slit-wide, mouth open, tongue flickering snakily. How fleshless she is! Beads of sweat glistening on her flat chest. Seizes my wrists, tugs me roughly toward the bed.

We tussle a little. Within my false body I throw switches, nudge levers. I am stronger than she is. I pull free, breaking her hold with an effort. She stands flatfooted in front of me, glaring, eyes fiery. So vulnerable, so sad in her nudity.

And yet so fierce.

"David! David! David!" Sobbing. Breathless. Pleading with her eyes and the tips of her breasts. Gathering her strength—now she makes the next lunge but I see it coming and let her topple past me. She lands on the bed, burying her face in the pillow, clawing at the sheet. "Why? Why why why WHY?" she screams.

In a minute we will have the manager in here. With the police.

"Am I so hideous? I love you, David, do you know what that word means? Love. Love." Sits up. Turns to me. Imploring. "Don't reject me," she whispers." I couldn't take that. You know, I just wanted to make you happy. I figured I could be the one, only I didn't realize how unhappy you'd make me. And you just stand there. And you don't say anything. What are you, some kind of machine?"

"I'll tell you what I am," I said.

That was when I went sliding into the abyss. All control lost, all prudence gone. My mind so slathered with raw emotion that survival itself means nothing. I must make things clear to her, is all. I must show her. At whatever expense. I strip off my shirt. She glows, no doubt thinking I will let

myself be seduced. My hands slide up and down my bare chest, seeking the catches and snaps. I go through the intricate, cumbersome process of opening my body. Deep within myself something is shouting, *No No No No No* . . . but I pay no attention. The heart has its reasons.

Hoarsely: "Look, Elizabeth. Look at me. This is what I am. Look at me and freak out. The reality trip."

My chest opens wide.

I push myself forward, stepping between the levers and struts, emerging halfway from the human shell I wear. I have not been this far out of it since the day they sealed me in, on Homeworld. I let her see my gleaming carapace. I wave my eyestalks around. I allow some of my claws to show.

"See? See? Big black crab from outer space. That's what you love, Elizabeth. That's what I am. David Knecht's just a costume and this is what's inside it." I have gone insane. "You want reality? Here's reality, Elizabeth. What good is the Knecht body to you? It's a fraud. It's a machine. Come on, come closer. Do you want to kiss me? Should I get on you and make love?"

During this episode her face has displayed an amazing range of reactions. Open-mouthed disbelief at first, of course. And frozen horror—gagging sounds in throat, jaws agape, eyes wide and rigid. Hands fanned across breasts. Sudden modesty in front of the alien monster? But then, as the familiar Knecht-voice, now bitter and impassioned, continues to flow from the black thing within the sundered chest, a softening of her response. Curiosity. The poetic sensibility taking over. Nothing human is alien to me: Terence, quoted by Cicero. Nothing alien is alien to me. Eh? She will accept the evidence of her eyes.

"What are you? Where did you come from?"

And I say, "I've violated the Fundamental Rule. I deserve to be plucked and thinned. We're not supposed to reveal ourselves. If we get into some kind of accident that might lead to exposure, we're supposed to blow ourselves up. The switch is right here."

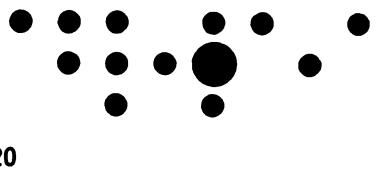
She comes close and peers around me, into the cavern of David Knecht's chest.

"From some other planet? Living here in disguise?" She understands the picture. Her shock is fading. She even laughs. "I've seen worse than you on acid," she says. "You don't frighten me now, David. David? Shall I go on calling you David?"

This is unreal and dreamlike to me. I have revealed myself, thinking to drive her away in terror; she is no longer aghast, and smiles at my strangeness. She kneels to get a better look. I move back a short way. Eyestalks fluttering—I am

uneasy, I have somehow lost the upper hand in this encounter.

She says, "I knew you were unusual, but not like this. But it's all right. I can cope. I mean, the essential personality, that's what I fell in love with. Who cares that you're a crab-man from the Green Galaxy? Who cares that we can't ever be real lovers? I can make that sacrifice. It's your soul I dig, David. Go on. Close yourself up again. You don't look comfortable this way." The triumph of love. She will not abandon me, even now. Disaster. I crawl back into Knecht and lift his arms to his chest to seal it. Shock is glazing my consciousness: the enormity, the audacity. What have I done? Elizabeth watches, awed, even delighted. At last I am together again. She nods. "Listen," she tells me, "you can trust me. I mean, if you're some kind of spy, checking out the Earth, I don't care. *I don't care.* I won't tell anybody. Pour it all out, David. Tell me about yourself. Don't you see? This is the biggest thing that ever happened to me. A chance to show that love isn't just physical, isn't just chemistry, that it's a soul trip, that it crosses not just racial lines but the lines of the whole damned species, the planet itself—"



It took several hours to get rid of her. A soaring, intense conversation, Elizabeth doing most of the talking. She putting forth theories of why I had come to Earth, I nodding, denying, amplifying, mostly lost in horror at my own perfidy and barely listening to her monolog. And the humidity turning me into rotting rags.

Finally: "I'm down from the pot, David. And all wound up. I'm going out for a walk. Then back to my room to write for a while. To put this night into a poem before I lose the power of it. But I'll come to you again by dawn, all right? That's maybe five hours from now. You'll be here? You won't do anything foolish? Oh, I love you so much, David! Do you believe me? Do you?"

When she was gone I stood a long while by the window, trying to reassemble myself. Shattered. Drained. Remembering her kisses, her lips running along the ridge marking the place where my chest opens. The fascination of the abomination. She will love me even if I am crustaceous beneath.

I had to have help.

I went to Swanson's room. He was slow to respond to my knock —busy transmitting, no doubt. I could hear him within but he didn't answer.

"Swanson?" I called. "Swanson?" Then I added the distress signal in the Homeworld tongue. He rushed to the door. Blinking,

suspicious. "It's all right," I said. "Look, let me in. I'm in big trouble."

Speaking English. But I gave him the distress signal again.

"How did you know about me?" he asked.

"The day the maid blundered into your room while you were eating, I was going by. I saw."

"But you aren't supposed to—"

"Except in emergencies. This is an emergency."

He shut off his ultrawave and listened intently to my story. Scowling. He didn't approve. But he wouldn't spurn me. I had been criminally foolish but I was of his kind, prey to the same pains, the same lonelinesses, and he would help me.

"What do you plan to do now?" he asked. "You can't harm her. It isn't allowed."

"I don't want to harm her. Just to get free of her. To make her fall out of love with me."

"How? If showing yourself to her didn't—"

"Infidelity," I said. "Making her see that I love someone else. No room in my life for her. That'll drive her away. Afterward it won't matter that she knows—who'd believe her story? The FBI would laugh and tell her to lay off the LSD. But if I don't break her attachment to me I'm finished."

"Love someone else? Who?"

"When she comes back to my room at dawn," I said, "she'll find the two of us together, dividing and abstracting. I think that'll do it, don't you?"

SO I deceived Elizabeth with Swanson.

The fact that we both wore male human identities was irrelevant, of course. We went to my room and stepped out of our disguises—a bold, dizzying sensation—and suddenly we were just two Homeworlders again, receptive to one another's needs. I left the door unlocked. Swanson and I crawled up on my bed and began the chanting. How strange it was after these years of solitude to feel those vibrations again! And how beautiful. Swanson's vibrissae touching mine. The interplay of harmonies. An underlying sternness to his technique—he was contemptuous of me for my idiocy and rightly so—but once we passed from the chanting to the dividing all was forgiven. And as we moved into the abstracting it was truly sublime. We climbed through an infinity of climactic emptyings. Dawn crept upon us and found us unwilling to halt even for rest.

A knock at the door. Elizabeth.

"Come in," I said.

A dreamy, ecstatic look on her face. Fading instantly when she saw the two of us entangled on the bed. A questioning frown.

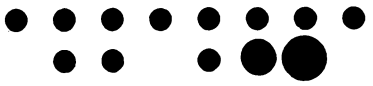
"We've been mating," I explained. "Did you think I was a complete hermit?" She looked

from Swanson to me, from me to Swanson. Hand over her mouth. Eyes anguished. I turned the screw a little tighter. "I couldn't stop you from falling in love with me, Elizabeth. But I really do prefer my own kind. As should have been obvious."

"To have her here now, though —when you knew I was coming back—"

"Not her, exactly. Not him exactly either, though."

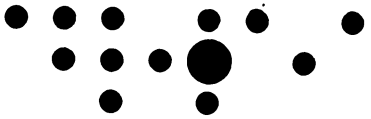
"—so cruel, David! To ruin such a beautiful experience"' Holding forth sheets of paper with shaking hands. "A whole sonnet cycle," she said. "About tonight. How beautiful it was and all. And now—and now—" Crumpling the pages. Hurling them across the room. Turning. Running out, sobbing furiously. Hell hath no fury like. "David!" A smothered cry. And slamming the door.



She was back in ten minutes. Swanson and I hadn't quite finished donning our bodies yet—we were both still unsealed. As we worked we discussed further steps to take. He felt honor demanded that I request a transfer back to Homeworld, having terminated my usefulness here through tonight's indiscreet revelation. I agreed with him to some degree but was reluctant to leave. Despite the bodily torment of life on Earth I had come to feel I belonged here.

Then Elizabeth entered, radiant.

"I mustn't be so possessive," she announced. "So bourgeois. So conventional. I'm willing to share my love." Embracing Swanson. Embracing me. "A *ménage á trois*," she said. "I won't mind that you two are having a physical relationship. As long as you don't shut me out of your lives completely. I mean, David, we could never have been physical anyway, right, but we can have the other aspects of love. And we'll open ourselves to your friend also. Yes? Yes? Yes?"



Swanson and I both put in applications for transfer, he to Africa, I to Homeworld. It would be some time before we received a reply. Until then we were at her mercy. He was blazingly angry with me for involving him in this but what choice had I had? Nor could either of us avoid Elizabeth. We were at her mercy. She bathed both of us in shimmering waves of tender emotion; wherever we turned, there she was, incandescent

with love. Lighting up the darkness of our lives. You poor lonely creatures. Do you suffer much in our gravity? What about the heat? And the winters. Is there a custom of marriage on your planet? Do you have poetry?

A happy threesome. We went to the theater together. To concerts. Even to parties in Greenwich Village.

"My friends," Elizabeth said, leaving no doubt in anyone's mind that she was living with both of us. Faintly scandalous doings; she loved to seem daring. Swanson was sullenly obliging, putting up with her antics but privately haranguing me for subjecting him to all this. Elizabeth got out another mimeographed booklet of poems, dedicated to both of us. *Triple Tripping*, she called it. Flagrantly erotic. I quoted a few of the poems in one of my reports to Homeworld, then lost heart and hid the booklet in the closet.

"Have you heard about your transfer yet?" I asked Swanson at least twice a week.

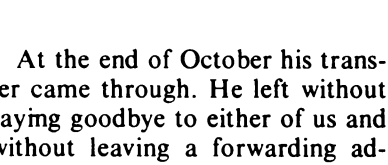
He hadn't. Neither had I.

Autumn came. Elizabeth, burning her candle at both ends, looked gaunt and feverish.

"I have never known such happiness," she announced frequently, one hand clasping Swanson, the other me. "I never think about the strangeness of you any more. I think of you only as people. Sweet, wonderful, lonely people. Here in the darkness of this horrid city."

And she once said, "What if everybody here is like you and I'm the only one who's really human? But that's silly. You must be the only ones of your kind here. The advance scouts. Will your planet invade ours? I do hope so! Set everything to rights. The reign of love and reason at last!"

"How long will this go on?" Swanson muttered.



At the end of October his transfer came through. He left without saying goodbye to either of us and without leaving a forwarding address. Nairobi? Addis Ababa? Kinshasa?

I HAD grown accustomed to having him around to share the burden of Elizabeth. Now the full brunt of her affection fell on me. My work was suffering. I had no time to file my reports properly. And I lived in fear of her gossiping. What was she telling her Village friends? (*You know David? He's not really a man, you know. Actually inside him there's a kind of crab-thing from another solar system. But what does that mat-*

ter? Love's a universal phenomenon. The truly loving person doesn't draw limits around the planet.) I longed for my release. To go home, to accept my punishment, to shed my false skin. To empty my mind of Elizabeth.

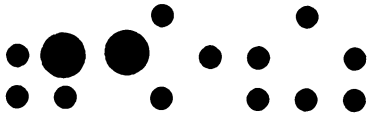
My reply came through the ultrawave on November thirteenth. Application denied. I was to remain on Earth and continue my work as before. Transfers to Homeworld were granted only for reasons of health.

I debated sending a full account of my treason to Homeworld and thus bringing about my certain recall. But I hesitated, overwhelmed with despair. Dark brooding seized me.

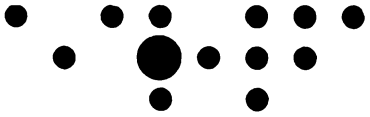
"Why so sad?" Elizabeth asked. What could I say? That my attempt at escaping from her had failed. "I love you," she said. "I've never felt so real before." Nuzzling against my cheek. Fingers knotted in my hair. A seductive whisper. "David, open yourself up again. Your chest, I mean. I want to see the inner you. To make sure I'm not frightened of it. Please? You've only let me see you once." And then, when I had: "May I kiss you, David?"

I was appalled. But I let her. She was unafraid. Transfigured by happiness. She is a cosmic nuisance but I fear I'm getting to like her.

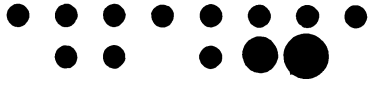
Can I leave her? I wish Swanson had not vanished. I need advice.



Either I break with Elizabeth or I break with Homeworld. This is absurd. I find new chasms of despondency every day. I am unable to do my work. I have requested a transfer once again, without giving details. The first snow of the winter today.

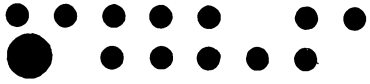


Application denied.

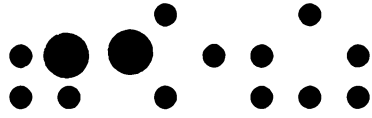


"When I found you with Swanson," she said, "it was a terrible shock. An even bigger blow than when you first came out of your chest. I mean, it was startling to find out you weren't human but it didn't hit me in any emotional way —it didn't threaten me. But then to come back a few hours later and find you with one of your own kind, to know that you wanted to shut me out, that I had no place in your life—only we worked it out, didn't we?"

Kissing me. Tears of joy in her eyes. How did this happen? Where did it all begin? Existence was once so simple. I have tried to trace the chain of events that brought me from there to here and I cannot. I was outside of my false body for eight hours today. The longest spell so far. Elizabeth is talking of going to the islands with me for the winter. A secluded cottage that her friends will make available. Of course, I must not leave my post without permission. And it takes months simply to get a reply.



Let me admit the truth: I love her.



January 1. The new year begins. I have sent my resignation to Homeworld and have destroyed my ultrawave equipment. The links are broken. Tomorrow, when the city offices are open, Elizabeth and I will go to get the marriage license. ●

TROUBLESHOOTER

MICHAEL G. CONEY

His flight companion was
a brain with a built-in
nightmare realer than dreams!

The ship floated huge in space, a black leviathan against the stars, infinitely menacing. He watched the rear viewscreen fear-fascinated as he thrust at the controls, pushing hard, although the lever was at its extremity. Fingers of terror caressed the back of his neck—willing the little scout to go faster, accelerate, get away from the monster at his back. But the acceleration was imperceptible, as though his craft were unable to break away from the gravitational pull of the giant freighter. As he stared at the screen it seemed in his imagination that the freighter was growing in size rather than diminishing. He pumped the levers, striving for more thrust. The vibration of the rockets altered. The little ship shuddered momentarily, hesitated. The starboard motor cut out and, as he watched, the vast bulk slid gradually off the rear screen. Feverishly he worked the attitude controls, striving uselessly to correct the wide arc. And presently the freighter slid into the forward screen like a killer whale moving in. He didn't scream. His lips moved soundlessly as the freighter grew and slowly, in a vivid carmine flare, exploded—disintegrating in a great cloud of expanding debris and white flame.

Then he screamed hoarsely—again and again—as the scout plunged into the crimson fireball.

DeGrazza, still screaming, screamed himself into consciousness and bright light as the sun streamed through the window of his bedroom, crimson through his eyelids.

"THE Altairids have lost their second ship in a week. Lost without trace somewhere within their asteroid belt. They've got to blame someone, so they blame Galactic Computers. Sometimes I wonder whether we ought to stick to earthbound computers . . . You're not looking fresh this morning, DeGrazza. Rough night?"

"I've known better."

"I can let Robins handle it if you like—but I wouldn't have brought you back from leave if it weren't important." Cobb eyed DeGrazza critically, noting the inflamed eyelids and the dark shadows beneath.

I hope he isn't cracking up.

Sometimes Cobb found it difficult to maintain his self-inflicted reputation as the tough-guy boss of Galactic Computers—especially when he saw good men, like DeGrazza exhibiting signs of nerves and tension from overwork.

"It's all right." DeGrazza made a conscious effort to pull himself together. "The Vegan freighter business shook me up a bit, I guess. And it wasn't our computer that failed to regulate the pile," he added bitterly. "Those bloody Vegans had bypassed the control to get more power. I see it now!"

"I read your report," Cobb said in sympathetic tones, hating himself for a hypocritical bastard. But he had to have DeGrazza back on this job. "You got a rough deal."

A rough deal. Nobody, thought DeGrazza, knew the full details of that final ten minutes aboard the freighter in orbit around Earth, when the Vegans had abandoned ship leaving him alone to deal with the runaway pile. As the captain left hastily he had informed DeGrazza that if the ship were lost, Galactic Computers would be made to foot the bill. Then, alone in the deserted freighter, he had found the overheated linkage fitted by the Vegans themselves, warped and impossible to shift. He had left the ship with minutes to spare and the explosion had been seen by half the Earth. The outcome was still DeGrazza's word against the Vegans.

"So what's the job this time?" he asked resignedly, wondering why he didn't quit. The answer was obvious. Mary made sure they lived to the limits of their means; the kids' education cost a fortune —the job paid well.

"Quite simple. You take a trip in an Altairid hopper as co-pilot. Keep your eyes open. See if anything suggests itself to you. It's quite a short journey from Altair Six to Eight, through the asteroid belt. Watch out for those asteroids —they're mostly uncharted."

"Our computer ought to handle that easily. It's radar-coupled."

"The Altairids have put in a modification," Cobb informed him mildly, bracing himself for the explosion.

It came. When DeGrazza had exhausted his extensive vocabulary he asked what modification?

"They're nervous folk, the Altairids. They've duplicated the control system, using an Altairid brain."

"You mean an organic brain?" asked DeGrazza in some disgust.

This type of organic-mechanical link-up was prevalent among various alien species. They considered it progress toward the day when an intelligent being would employ thought alone to control his environment.

"Uh—yes. It's fitted in parallel with our computer. Receives the same instructions from the keyboard, radar and so on, on duplicated wiring—but does nothing unless positive instruction is received, either from pilot or radar, that the computor is making a mistake. Then it can override our equipment."

"So the brain is superfluous," commented DeGrazza.

"I should have thought so but the Altairids think otherwise. They say that if our computer should break down in an emergency, say due to an overload in the input, the brain is quick. It can receive input without a keyboard."

"How's that?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" Cobb's tone was innocent. "The Altairids are telepathic."

He eyed DeGrazza blandly.

"That's all I need," muttered DeGrazza in disgust. "To have one of those weirdies picking my mind while I'm trying to stop an argument between our computer and their blasted brain."

Cobb remarked, "So you've come to the same conclusion. Somewhere there's a conflict between the computer and the brain. Maybe over a certain type of instruction."

"If I notice any trouble brewing up between them," grated DeGrazza savagely, "I'll put a bullet though that brain."

But you can't do that, DeGrazza, because preservation of equipment comes before preservation of self. They say because an examination of faulty gear may yield information to save hundreds of lives but you know they are lying. The machine has replaced the man—therefore it is more valuable and must be saved first. But the brain is organic. What is the order of precedence here?

IT USED to be a long way from Earth to Altair but hyperspace and FTL changed all that and the journey left him with little time for dreaming.

He was met at the pad and escorted to the offices of Altair Hoppers. The Altairids were humanoid—tall, gentle people with luminous eyes and they looked at him, at his uncouth, squat, bearded form as though he were a murderer. He wondered what they were thinking—what signals flashed from mind to mind of the reception committee, as they met DeGrazza, the embodiment of the company whose computers had lured their colleagues to death among the asteroids.

DeGrazza, your guilt is showing. These men can read your mind. The computers are foolproof—think that if you can!

Toward the end of the second day of the seven-day hop DeGrazza tried an experiment, first ensuring that the Altairid pilot was safely asleep. He glanced at the forward viewscreen, saw nothing untoward apart from the occasional streak of an outlying pebble from the asteroid belt. The cabin of the hopper was tiny, the bulk of the large ship being taken up with cargo space for slow-speed interplanetary trading. The two seats, pilot's and copilot's, were side by side, facing a common console. Set into the fascia of the console, in addition to the controls, were the forward and rear viewscreens and behind it, between the instruments and the nose of the ship, were the radar, the Galactic's computer and, presumably, the brain.

DeGrazza reached forward and punched a random series of directions into the computer keyboard, watching the gyroscopic DF needles carefully.

The ship appeared to hesitate, lurched slightly—then the needles steadied as the brain, sensing through the radar no obstacles ahead, corrected the erroneous data and brought the ship back on course.

First round to the Altairids.

DeGrazza sat back and contemplated. From the information supplied by the Altairids he had gathered that the brains used were, in effect, hypnotized before installation and programed to respond only when their subconscious registered an unexpected deviation. Thus they would normally be alert only when the ships were among the larger asteroids and course corrections were frequent. Otherwise their higher thinking capabilities were shut down. A brain could not therefore ponder to itself for years in a lonely, inactive void and thereby go insane. Theoretically. The brain, he told himself, was an organic computer, nothing more. Moreover, it could only think in terms of figures, so they said.

So why had two ships crashed among the asteroids?

Was the ship's brain thinking a few moments ago? Did the brain know horror and bewilderment as the ship veered insanely off course, a madman at the controls?

Steady, DeGrazza. It's quite possible that the brain can read your mind and had anticipated the test you proposed before your fingers hit the keys. But that should not be possible because the brain cannot conceive abstract ideas—only digits. How do you express fear in numbers? Does the brain resent the computer in some mathematical fashion?

The cabin was very small, womblike—the feeling that there were more than two intelligencies present was claustrophobic.

How many can think, and how do they think? DeGrazza, Altairid, brain, computer. Everywhere a conflict.

The ship lurched again, suddenly and violently, and this time DeGrazza hadn't touched the controls. Again came the jolt—he stared at the screen but could see nothing to account for the deviation.

"What's happening?"

The Altairid was alert, grasping the manual attitude controls, peering at the gyro needles. Quickly he brought the ship back on course.

"I don't know," admitted DeGrazza. "She suddenly went berserk. I didn't touch anything."

"Then the computer suffered a malfunction," stated the alien with underlying satisfaction. "It's fortunate that this didn't happen among the asteroids proper."

DeGrazza went on the defensive.

"Perhaps the brain went haywire."

"If I had been in your position I would have tested the brain during my sleep period," remarked the Altairid shrewdly. "I imagine you did so."

"I did," DeGrazza muttered reluctantly. Then, with a sudden flash of annoyance: "Were you reading my thoughts? We'd better get this straight. If you want my cooperation you've got to keep out of my mind. I won't have it, I tell you. Don't forget, you've no proof that our computers went wrong. That's only supposition and it wouldn't get you anywhere in court. But between us we might sort something out—if you lay off the telepathy."

"Steady, DeGrazza," admonished the alien gently. "I wasn't prying into your brain. I don't work like that. Unless I make a deliberate effort to concentrate, all I receive from you is a general impression of the emotions uppermost in your mind."

"Let's keep it that way."

"Naturally. Now, if you will forgive me, what was the outcome of your private test on the brain?"

"It worked. It regained control."

"So the computer must be faulty."

"Listen," said DeGrazza desperately. "I've worked for Galactic Computers for twenty years and we've never in all that time had a serious malfunction. The unit itself is foolproof—duplicated printed circuits, the lot. Any error has always been in the ancillary equipment and that's pretty safe, too. But the computer must work perfectly. It's the combination of computer plus brain that causes the trouble. It can't be anything else. Some sort of feedback between the two."

"The brain cannot fail," stated the alien categorically.

This time the Vegan freighter was under his feet. He was kicking himself off across the short distance to the scout's airlock. Space was like oil—he floated slowly, so slowly, manipulating the jet pack with fumbling fingers, setting his course to cover the distance in the quickest time, forgetting in his haste the slight rotation of the huge ship. He was drifting past his scout too fast to make another correction—he would have to make an orbit and approach the airlock from the opposite direction. The hull plates crept past—a horizontal weld, a blank area of metal, a strip of weld, again, again—how many plates were there to a circumference, for God's sake? At last, the airlock. He seized the projecting handhold, stepped inside the confined space, turned to pull the hatch shut behind him. He saw the black freighter expand like an overinflated tube and burst, sweep-

ing fire towards the scout, engulfing him. . .

"DE GRAZZA!" The shout echoed in his ears as he struggled to the surface of life.

He opened his eyes. The Altairid stood before him, staring into his face with an expression of horror and concern. He gazed around him, feeling the sweat dribbling down his neck, seeing the interior of the cabin. He was in the Altairid hopper, three days out from Altair VI, and the Vegan freighter was weeks behind him.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Your mind is haunted," replied the alien slowly.

DeGrazza, you are haunted by the converging pressures of the past and future, squeezing your mind until it screams with pain in the night when the defences are relaxed. Mary, the Vegan freighter, the kids, Mary, the brain, Cobb, the Altairid, Mary—all pushing your senses to madness, crushing upon you from the past. But what unknown glacier of fear is pressing back from the future, chilling your mind with advance icebergs of presentiment?

"What are you talking about? I sometimes have nightmares, that's all. If you didn't pry into other people's minds you wouldn't get frightened. Lay off me, will you?"

DeGrazza sank back in his seat, trembling as much from reaction to the dream as from annoyance at the Altairid's intrusion.

"The contact was not of my seeking. The emissions were so strong that I couldn't keep them out. I've never seen a mental picture so vivid."

"Don't you get dreams?"

A thoughtful silence.

Then: "Occasionally. Like yours—but mine are a race memory which affects most of my people. We see a giant explosion in the sky, accompanied by a sensation of utter horror. Probably the similarity to your dream is what disturbed me."

"A race memory?"

"You do not know Altairid history? Once we were a young race and warlike, very unlike our present timid selves. We had spread from what you call Altair Six to the nearest two planets, Seven and Eight, but our sciences had not taught us sense."

"Science and sense are not always synonymous, in any language," observed DeGrazza ruefully.

"This was a long time ago and we like to think that we have progressed since. Anyway, one day Altair Seven, the first colony, proclaimed independence. Imagine that—they came from the same stock as their fathers on Altair Six, yet they wished to be considered apart."

"I've known examples which have worked out."

"But we are telepathic—all of the same family. It was like an amputation."

"Or like putting a live brain in a box?" asked DeGrazza skeptically.

"That is necessity born of our cautious characteristics, which were themselves born of the events which followed independence of Altair Seven. As I was saying—the fact that members of our own race had cut themselves off was felt very deeply. Overtures were made but to no effect. They were repulsed—and gradually the attitude of both factions hardened. Diplomatic relations were eventually severed entirely. All of this occurred centuries ago, you understand. Then came the climax. The breakaway world of Altair Seven laid claim to Altair Eight on the grounds that it was from their planet that Eight had been colonised. All quite true—but the people of Altair Eight were quite content to remain with us. Full scale war broke out. Our ancestors had prepared themselves for this day over a long period—it was obvious what the outcome would be. Interplanetary missiles were launched from both Six and Eight timed to coincide with sabotage explosions on Seven itself."

"No quarter given in those days," murmured DeGrazza.

"It was them or us. The day came when the entire planet of Altair Seven was shrouded in gigantic explosions. Half the population was watching from my own planet and what they saw was etched on their memories for a lifetime—and their children, born afterward saw it in their parents' minds and their children. The memory of the disintegration of Altair Seven persists to this day and with it, fear. It is hardly surprising that violence in any form is abhorrent to my people and timid self-preservation is now our primary characteristic."

"So Altair Seven became your asteroid belt," observed DeGrazza.

"The evidence of our shame will be visible forever. The belt is highly radioactive even now."

"Radioactive?" DeGrazza was struck by an idea.

"Certainly."

"I wonder—" DeGrazza gazed at the radar screen, watching the multitude of moving sparks through which the computer, with frequent course corrections, was guiding them.

"BUT if the brain is capable of overriding the computer at any time, then it must be the brain that is affected by radiation," DeGrazza had said.

And the Altairid, tiring of the argument which had become repetitive, had replied once again. "The brain is shielded."

He had shown DeGrazza the cabinet behind which the brain

resided and had assured the Earthman that it was lead-lined and proof even against cumulative effect.

So once again DeGrazza sat his solo watch, the alien dozing fitfully in his seat, the asteroids flicking past the viewscreen, the radar showing more and bigger to come. Two days to go and so far only the germ of an idea which might not, on this particular trip, be capable of any sort of proof. DeGrazza examined his thoughts critically. Hell, he didn't want the ship to hit an asteroid. On the other hand, he didn't relish a string of uneventful trips, waiting for something to go wrong.

So what do you want, DeGrazza? What exactly are you hoping for in this night of stars? Are you sure that it is not death you are seeking, the quick death of escaping air and ruptured blood vessels which will release you for ever from the bonds of Mary and Cobb, the freighter and radioactivity? Or is it that you welcome the timeless effect of space travel, feeling you stand still while others grow old? In such a fashion the pincers are eased, the converging jaws of past and future are stilled and the mind senses that last week is last week and next week is no closer because you, DeGrazza, are in a limbo anticline of space-antitime. And you deceive yourself, because every past second takes you into the future. That future awaiting you when, as well you know, in the midst of the complex of relays and sensors and cell-tissue, so failsafe and foolproof and duplicated that nothing will go wrong. . .

And yet something had gone wrong three standard days ago when the ship had apparently gotten out of control momentarily and the Altairid had regained control manually. There had been no problem because they had not been surrounded by flying chunks of rock. By the look of the radar now they were really in the thick of it—one asteroid ten degrees to starboard appeared as big as Iceland and there were other similar pieces about.

Three days ago there had been few meteorites, yet the ship had veered off course. Was the radiation theory feasible? Briefly DeGrazza considered the explosive force of Altair VII creating some kind of invisible antimatter but rejected the possibility as too farfetched.

The vast meteorite grew in the radar screen and he eyed it nervously, calculating how far to starboard it would pass, his stomach tense with the thought that this time, at a moment some few miles away, the brain computer might choose, perversely, to act up. There would be no question of sealing a few punctures and carrying on—the ship would be lost

without trace on that miniature planet, strewn about the radioactive crags.

The asteroid, now occupying half the radar screen, crept into the corner of the viewscreen. Over the years DeGrazza had learned to rely on his hunches. His fingers hovered over the controls while his eyes watched the spreading landscape of mountains, fissures and hard, jet shadow. He glanced at the alien beside him, eyelids fluttering in half-sleep, and wondered if he should wake him.

When the direction jets kicked, the violent movement nevertheless caught him only half-prepared and he was flung from his seat to the bulkhead. His head snapped back, smashing into the metal with a sick thud. He watched, helpless and dazed as the ship, veering, headed directly towards the jagged profusion of pinnacles . . .

This is it, DeGrazza—this is the climax you have been waiting for. This is the instant when you will have to decide, once and forever, whether you want to live or die. Because you can die now easily—just by lying stunned, allowing your will for self-preservation to ebb into the past, becoming weaker with each successive moment as you comfortably slip into unconsciousness. You can die now if you want to. If you really want to. . .

The features of the asteroid surface became clearer, nearer, expanding in the screen. Sharp silver crags, inky ravines, brief barren plains slid past. He saw dimly, swinging rapidly closer, a gigantic structure of shattered, twisted steelwork, throwing striding shadows across a rugged hillside. He screamed, struggling to reach the controls. Too weak to rise, he shook the limp form of the Altairid beside him. The dull eyes flickered open.

"Contact the brain!"

The alien's eyes cleared. He glanced quickly at the screen. There was an infinitesimal pause, then the asteroid swung away, the landscape tilting. The stars reappeared. They were back on course.

DeGrazza, you live. That was what you wanted in the end.

"NOW perhaps you realize the advantages of the brain," remarked the alien some minutes later. "It would have been impossible to reach the controls in time but the brain responded instantly to my commands and overrode the incorrect course set by the radar and computer."

"You're assuming too much," muttered DeGrazza, still feeling dizzily sick. "Wait a moment," he said suddenly. "You say that the brain will accept telepathic commands and obey them regardless of what the radar is picking up? I thought it was just the computer

that was bypassed." He frowned.

"Radar can go wrong, too. The possibility of a malfunction is inherent in anything mechanical or electrical. Telepathic instructions therefore take precedence over any others."

"I see," murmured DeGrazza.

Malaise forgotten, interest and will to live restored, his mind darted among the byways revealed by the new information.

"Ask the brain why it changed course," he said abruptly, nevertheless feeling that this was too simple. There was some explanation in the back of his mind as to why this could not be done.

"Impossible. The brain can only think in terms of numbers. It could not conceive the meaning of that type of question."

Of course.

"Right, then," said DeGrazza, knowing that he should have thought of this two days ago. "Ask the brain to repeat back the last few sequences of course corrections." He had been so wrapped up in the notion of radiation and a brain/computer conflict that he had missed checking up on this obvious clue. Find out where the ship was headed and he might find out why.

"That can be done," agreed the Altairid.

DeGrazza readied a stylus and pad.

"278-125," intoned the alien, eyes closed, concentrating on the pictures relayed from the brain.

DeGrazza wrote briskly.

"279-127—these are the present checks on the computer. It might take a while to get back."

"Carry on."

"279-126 — 279-125 — 279-127 — 278-129 — Going back now. 278-128 — 198-128 — That was my evasive action. Nothing. 46-308—45-308—"

"What's that?"

"46-308 — " droned the Altairid. "46-310 — nothing — 279-128 — 279-129 — 278-129 —"

"Back on course," murmured DeGrazza. "This is before we went out of control. Wake up."

He nudged the alien who was still mumbling bearings as if hypnotized.

"You got the figures down?"

"Yes, fine, thanks."

DeGrazza studied the pad, comparing the list with the printout of the same bearings from the computer.

"Do they mean anything to you?"

"They mean one thing," responded the Earthman grimly. "As far as the computer was concerned we were on the correct course. There's no sign of 46- readings on the computer printout. Which proves that it was the brain, and only the brain, that sent us off course."

He showed the alien the lists.

"46-308—" the alien read aloud. "45-308 — 46-308 —. That's odd."

(Please turn to page 143)

THE PIECEMAKERS

KEITH LAUMER

A Retief story of war and piece—and flower power!

I

"GENTLEMEN," Undersecretary for Extraterrestrial Affairs Thunderstroke announced in tones of doom, "it looks like war."

"What looks like war?" a stout man in plainly tailored civvies asked blurrily, as one just awakened from a pleasant nap. "War, you say?" He slapped the conference table with a well-manicured hand. "Well, its about time we taught the beggars a lesson!"

"You've leaped to a faulty conclusion, Colonel," the undersecretary said sourly. "We are not on the point of embarking on hostilities—"

"Naturally not," the military advisor said, rising. "Not your job. Civilians all very well—but time now for military to take over. You'll excuse me, Mr. Secretary? I must rejoin my regiment at once—"

"Sit down, Henry," the chief of the Groaci Desk said tiredly. "You haven't got the big picture. No Terran forces are involved on Yudore at all. Strictly an Eetee affair."

"Sound thinking." The colonel nodded approvingly. "Why throw away the lives of Terran lads when plenty of native lives are available for the purpose? To be given selflessly in defense of sacred Terran principles, that is to say. By the way, which is our side?"

"Try to grasp the point, Colonel," the undersecretary said acidly. "We're neutral in the affair."

"Of course—but whom are we neutral in favor of? Or in favor of whom, I should say, are we—"

"No one. And we intend to keep it that way."

"Umm." The colonel resumed his seat and his nap.

"It appears," the undersecretary resumed, "that our old friends the Groaci are locked in an eyestalk-to-eyestalk confrontation with the Slox."

"What are these shlocks called, sir?" the acting assistant deputy undersecretary inquired in a tone of deep synthetic interest.

"Slox, Magnan, S-l-o-x. Inveterate trouble-makers from the Slox System, half a dozen lights in-Arm. It appears both they and the Groaci are claiming mandateship of Yudore, an unexceptional planet of a small Class G sun well off the trade routes."

"Well, why doesn't one of them just go mandate somewhere else?" a commerce man demanded. "There are scads of available planets out that way."

"The Groaci state that Yudore falls within their natural sphere of influence," Thunderstroke said. "As for the Slox, their position is that they found the place first."

"THEY could flip a coin for it," the commerce man snapped. "Then we could all get

back to matters of importance, such as the abnormal rate of increase in the rate of decrease of the expansion of the trend toward reduction of increasing berp-nut consumption among unwed fathers ages nine through ninety on backward worlds of the Nicodeman group, a development which I just detected this morning through the use of refined psychostatistical techniques."

"Good lord, Chester—" a political forecast specialist picked up the cue—"what will be the projected impact of this downturn in the upturn?"

"Upturn of the downturn, if you must use layman's language," Chester corrected. "Why, at the present rate it appears that by fiscal 'ninety-seven there'll be a record high in unwed fathers."

"To return to the subject at hand, gentlemen," Thunderstroke cut in ominously, "both parties to the dispute have dispatched battle fleets to stand by off Yudore, primed for action."

"Hmm. Seems to me there's a solution of sorts implicit in that datum," someone murmured.

"Let us hope not. An outbreak of hostilities would blot our copybooks badly, gentlemen." Thunderstroke glared at the offender. "Unfortunately the Groaci ambassador has assured me privately that his government's position is unalterable. Groaci doctrine, as he explained matters, makes accommodation with what he terms 'vile-smelling opportunists' impossible, while a spokesman for the Slox has announced they refuse to yield an inch to the 'five-eyed sticky fingers—' as he calls the opposition party."

"It sounds like a major policy blunder on the part of the Groaci," Magnan observed contentedly. "How refreshing that for once the CDT is not involved."

"We could hardly be said to be uninvolved, Mr. Magnan," Thunderstroke pointed out sternly, "if we undertake to mediate the dispute."

"No, I suppose not—but why be pessimistic? Who would be idiot enough to suggest poking our nose into that bag of annelids?"

"As it happens," Thunderstroke said in a voice like an iceberg sliding into an Arctic sea, "I did!"

"You, sir?" Magnan croaked. "Why, what a splendid notion—now that I've had time to consider it in depth, I mean."

A fragile-looking acting section chief sprang to the undersecretary's support.

"After all, our function as diplomats is to maintain interplanetary tensions at a level short of violence."

"Would you want to make that 'reduce tensions,' Chester?" the information agency representive inquired, pencil poised. "Just in case you're quoted out of context."

"No reporters," Thunderstroke

decreed. "I shudder to think what critics of the Corps might make of any little slip in our part in this affair."

"I suppose you'll be sending along a hundred-man Conciliation Team with a squadron of Peace Enforcers to deal with the matter," Magnan said, a speculative look on his narrow features.

"Hardly," Thunderstroke said flatly. "This is a job for finesse, not brute diplomacy. In a situation of this nature, a single shrewd, intrepid, coolly efficient negotiator is the logical choice."

"Of course, sir, how shallow of me not to have seen it at once." Magnan pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Naturally, the task calls for a man of wide experience—"

"With a total contempt for deadly personal danger," someone put in.

"Preferably without a family," Magnan added, nodding.

"Too bad that lets me out," a deputy assistant undersecretary said briskly. "As you know, I'm the sole support of twelve cats and a most demanding parakeet—"

"I wasn't thinking of you, Henry," Thunderstroke said severely. "I had in mind a senior diplomat, a man of lofty IQ, unshakable principle and unquestioned dexterity in the verbal arena."

"Good lord, sir," Magnan blurted. "I appreciate your confidence, but my duties here—"

"Unfortunately," Thunderstroke bored on, "the files have failed to produce the name of any such paragon. Hence I must make do with the material at hand."

"Well!" Magnan muttered under his breath, then paled as Thunderstroke fixed him with an imperious eye.

"I assume your inoculations are in order?" the undersecretary inquired coldly.

"Mine, sir?" Magnan said, pushing his chair back and rising hastily. "Actually, my hayfever shot is due in half an hour—"

"I suggest you ask for a heavy dosage of anti-radiation drugs while you're there," the assistant for ET affairs said cheerfully. "And of course a tetanus shot wouldn't do any harm."

"Kindly be seated, Magnan," Thunderstroke barked. "Now, you'll be going in in a plainly marked courier vessel. I suggest you exercise caution as you approach the battle flotillas. The Slox are said to be even more trigger-happy than the notoriously impetuous Groaci."

"I'm to go into that hornet's nest, sir—in an unarmed boat?"

"You'll be armed with instructions, Magnan. Buck up, man. This is no time to show the white feather."

Magnan sank into his chair. "As for myself, I'm delighted, of course," he said breathlessly. "I was just thinking of all those innocent crew members."

"I'd considered that aspect, Magnan. And of course you're right. It would be folly to risk the lives of an entire crew."

Magnan brightened.

"Therefore, you'll be dropped a fractional A.U. from the scene of action in a fast one-man scout."

"A one man boat? But—" Magnan paused. "But unfortunately," he went on in tones of relief, "I don't know how to pilot one."

"Why not?" Thunderstroke demanded.

"Sector regs discourage it," Magnan said crisply. "Only last month a chap in my department received a severe dressing down for engaging in acrobatics over Lake Prabchinc—"

"Oh? What's this fellow's name?"

"Retief, sir. But as I said, he's already received a reprimand, so it won't be necessary—"

"Retief." Thunderstroke made a note. "Very well. Make that a two-man scout, Magnan."

"But—"

"No buts, Magnan. This is war—or it will be if you fail. And time is of the essence. I'll expect you and this Retief fellow to be on the way to the battle zone within the hour."

"But sir—two diplomats against two fleets?"

"Hm. Phrased in that fashion, it does sound a bit unfair. Still—they started it. Let them take the consequences."

II

STRAPPED into the confining seat of the thirty-foot skiff, waiting in the drop-bay of the Corps transport, Magnan watched the launch clock nervously.

"Actually," he said, "the undersecretary had his heart set on a one-man mission—but at my insistence he agreed to send me along with you."

"I wondered who my benefactor was," Retief said. "Nice to know you were thinking of me."

"Retief—are you implying—" Magnan broke off as the voice of the captain of the mother ship rang from the panel speaker.

"Fifteen seconds, gentlemen. Say, I hope your policies are all paid up. From what my translator tells me about the transmissions those boys are exchanging up ahead, you're going to arrive just in time for M minute."

"I wish he'd trip the launch lever," Magnan snapped. "I'll be profoundly happy to depart this hulk, if only to be away from that gloating voice."

"I heard that," the captain said. "What's the matter, no sense of humor?"

"I'm convulsed," Magnan said.

"Better unconvulse," came the swift suggestion. "This is it. Happy landings—"

There was a slam of relays, a thud, a jolt that dimmed the passengers' vision for a long, dizzying

moment. When it cleared, black space dotted with fiery points glared from the screens. Astern, the transport dwindled and was gone.

"I'm picking them up already," Retief said, manipulating the controls of the R-screen. "Our daredevil captain dropped us practically in their midst."

"Has the shooting started?" Magnan gasped.

"Not yet. But from the look of those battle formations it won't be long."

"Maybe we ought to transmit our plea for peace, from here," Magnan said hurriedly. "Something eloquent to appeal to their finer natures, with just a smidgin of veiled threat on the side."

"I have a feeling it's going to take more than sparkling conversation to stop these fellows," Retief said. "Anybody who owns a new battlewagon has a natural yen to see if it works."

"I've been thinking," Magnan said abruptly. "You know how short the CDT is of trained personnel—now that we've seen the hopelessness of the task, it's our duty to salvage what we can from the debacle. Besides, an eyewitness report will be of inestimable value to the undersecretary when the board of inquiry starts digging into the question of how he allowed a war to start right under our noses."

"I'm with you so far, sir."

"That being the case," Magnan went on quickly, "if you should insist on withdrawing from the scene at this point, I hardly see how I could prevent you."

"You're in command, Mr. Magnan," Retief pointed out. "But I have a distinct feeling that our reception back at Sector would be less then enthisiastic if we don't have at least a few blast burns on the hull to show for our trouble."

"But, Retief!" Magnan pointed at the screen on which the long, deadly-looking shape of a Groaci cruiser was growing steadily. "Look at that monster, bristling with guns from stem to stern. How can you reason with that kind of firepower?"

AT THAT moment a crackle of static blared from the screen. A pale, alien visage with five stalked eyes stared out at the Terrans from under a flared war helmet.

"To identify yourselves at once, rash interlopers," a weak voice hissed in sibilant Groaci. "To be gone instantly or suffer dire consequences—"

"Why, if it isn't Broodmaster Slith!" Magnan cried. "Retief, it's Broodmaster Slith. You remember Broodmaster Slith of the Groacian Trade Mission to Haunch Four?"

"Is it you, Magnan?" the Groaci grated. "When last we met you

were meddling in Groaci affairs under the guise of selfless uplifter, disrupting peaceful commerce. In what role do you now intrude in Groacian space?"

"Now, Slith, you have to confess it was a bit much, selling plastic frankfurters to those poor backward hot-dog lovers—"

"How were we to know their inferior metabolisms were incapable of assimilating wholesome polystyrenes?" Slith snarled. "Enough of this chatter. Withdraw at once or take full responsibility for precipitation of a regrettable incident."

"Now, don't be hasty, Broodmaster—"

"You may address me as Grand Commander of Avenging Flotillas Slith, if you please. As for haste, it is a virtue I recommend to you. In sixty seconds I order my gunners to fire."

"I suggest you reconsider, Commander," Retief said. "At the first shot from your guns, three will get you five the Slox open up on you with everything they've got."

"What matter? Let the miscreants invoke the full wrath of outraged Groacihood."

"At a rough count, they have thirty-one ships to your twenty-four," Retief pointed out. "I think they've got you out-wrathed."

"But what's all this talk of shooting?" Magnan cried. "What could possibly be gained by gunfire?"

"Certain parcels of real estate, for a starter," Slith said crisply. "Plus the elimination of certain alien vermin."

Magnan gasped. "You confess you're here to take Yudore by force?"

"Hardly—not that the matter is of any concern to Terran spies. My mission here is to prevent the invasion of hapless Yudore by the insidious Slox—"

"I hear this," a rasping, high-pitched voice cut in from the auxiliary screen. It was accompanied by a hissing of background noise. A wavering image formed on the tube, steadied into the form of a shiny, purplish-red cranium, long and narrow, knobbed and spiked. A pair of yellow eyes were mounted on outriggers that projected a foot on either side. "I outrage! I do not endure! You are gave one minutes, Eastern Standard Time, for total abandon of vicinity! Counting! Nine, twelve, two, several—"

"What—what is it?" Magnan gasped, staring at the newcomer to the conversation.

"Aha—collusion between Soft One and Slox!" Slith keened. "I see it now! You thought to distract my attention with an exchange of civilities while your vile cronies executed a sneak attack—"

"I—Chief General Okkyokk—chum to these monstrositaries?" The Slox spokesman screeched.

"Such indignant my language lack! Insufficient you threaten to lowly benefits of Slox Protectorate—but addition of insults! My goodness! Drat! Other obscenity as required!"

"It will not avail you to rant," Slith whispered in a venomous tone. "My guns stand ready to answer your slurs—"

"Only incredible restrains of high-class Slox general intrudes herself to spare those skinny neck!" Okkyokk yelled in reply.

"Gentlemen, don't get carried away," Magnan called over the hiss of static. "I'm sure this can all be worked out equitably—"

"Unless this pernicious meddler in the Groaci destiny disperses his flimsy hulls at once, I'll not be responsible for the result," Slith declared.

"My frustrate!" Okkyokk yelled and brandished a pair of anterior limbs tipped with compli-

cated shredding devices. "Gosh, such wish to know sensation of plait all five eyes into single superocular, followed by pluck like obscene daisy—"

"To wait in patience until the happy moment when I officiate at your burial, head-down, in the ceremonial sand-box," Slith countered.

"Well, at least they're still speaking to each other," Magnan said as the exchange raged on. "That's something."

"We may get through this without any hull-burns after all," Retief said. "They have each other bluffed. It looks like talk rather than torpedoes will carry the day. I suggest we execute a strategic withdrawal while they slug it out, vocabulary-to-vocabulary."

"Hmm. Scant points in that for Terran diplomacy. Duty demands that we play a more creative role in the *rapprochment*." Magnan put a finger against his narrow chin. "Now, if I should be the one to propose an equitable solution—"

"Let's not remind them we're here, Mr. Magnan," Retief suggested. "Frustrated tempers are often taken out in thrown crockery and we'd make a convenient teacup—"

"Nonsense, they'd never dare." Magnan leaned forward. "Gentlemen," he called over the din of battle. "I have the perfect solution. Since there seems to be some lack of confidence on the part of each of you in the benign intentions of the other, I propose that Yudore be placed under a Terran Protectorate." Magnan smiled expectantly.

THERE was an instant of total silence as two sets of alien sense organs froze, oriented toward the interruption. Slith was the first to break the paralysis.

"What? Leave the fruits of Groaci planning to Terran harvesting? Never."

"I convulse!" Okkyokk howled. "I exacerbate! I froth at buccal cavity! How are you invite? Mercy! Heavens to Marmaduke! Et cetera!"

"Gentlemen," Magnan said. "We Terrans would only remain on Yudore until such time as the aborigines had been properly educated in modern commercial methods and sexual hygiene, after which we'd withdraw in favor of local self-determination!"

"First to pervert, then to abandon!" Slith hissed. "Bold threats, Soft Ones! But I defy you! General Okkyokk! I propose a truce while we band together to confront the common enemy."

"Done! Caramba! I effronterize! I mortal insult! I even annoy! First destruction we the kibitzer! Then proceedure to Slox-Groaci quarrel!"

"Wait!" Magnan yelped. "You don't understand—"

"I'm afraid they do," Retief

said as he reached for the controls. "Hang on for evasive action, Mr. Magnan." The tiny craft leaped ahead, curvetting wildly left and right. There was a flash and the screens went white and blanked out. The boat bucked wildly and flipped end-for-end. A second detonation sent it spinning like a flat stone skipped over a pond.

"Retief—stop! We're headed straight for no-man's land!" Magnan gasped as a lone screen flickered back to life, showing a vast Groaci battlewagon swelling dead ahead.

"We're going in under their guns," Retief snapped. "Running away, we'd be a sitting duck."

"Maybe they'll let us surrender," Magnan bleated. "Can't we run out a white flag or something?"

"I'm afraid it would just give them an aiming point." Retief wrenched the boat sideways, rode out another near miss, dove under the big ship's stern.

"Look out—" Magnan screamed as a vast, mottled blue-green disk slid onto the screen. "We'll crash on Yudore—"

"If we're lucky," Retief agreed. Then the rising keening of splitting air made further conversation impossible.

III

EXCEPT for the fading hiss of escaping air and the *ping* of hot metal contracting, the only sounds audible in the shattered cockpit were Magnan's groans as he extricated himself from the wreckage of his contour chair. Through a rent in the hull, yellow sunlight glared on the smoking ruins of the scout boat's control panel, the twisted and buckled floor plates, the empty pilot's seat.

"Glad to see you're awake," Retief said. Magnan turned his aching head to see his companion leaning in the open escape hatch, apparently intact but for a bruise on the cheekbone and a burned patch on the front of his powder-blue blazer. "The air's a little thin but the O_2 content seems adequate. How do you feel?"

"Ghastly," Magnan confided. He fumbled his shock harness free and groped his way through the hatch to drop down shakily on a close-cropped peach-colored sward. All around, tall, treelike growths with ribbed red-orange trunks rose into the pale sky, supporting masses of spongy tangerine-toned foliage. Clumps of yellow, amber and magenta blossoms glowed in the shade like daubs of fluorescent paint.

"Why are we still alive?" the senior diplomat inquired dazedly. "The last thing I remember is a pale pink mountain sticking up through a cloud bank directly in our path."

"We missed it," Retief reassured his chief. "There was just

enough power left on our plates to cushion touchdown. That and a lot of springy foliage saved our necks."

"Where are we?"

"On a small island in the northern hemisphere, which seems to be the only land on the planet. That's about as specific as I can be, I'm afraid—and I designated the north pole arbitrarily at that."

"Well—let's get it over with." Magnan sighed, looking around. "Where are they? I suggest we throw ourselves on Slitch's mercy. Frankly, I don't trust that Okkyokk—there's something shifty about those cantilevered oculars of his."

"I'm afraid we won't be able to surrender immediately," Retief said. "Our captors haven't yet arrived."

"Hmm. Doubtless they're making a somewhat less precipituous approach than we. I suppose we might as well make ourselves comfortable."

"On the other hand," Retief said reasonably, "why wait around?"

"What other hope of rescue have we?"

"I don't think either party would make the ideal host—assuming they bother with live prisoners in the first place."

"You're implying that Slith—a fellow bureaucrat—a being with whom I've shared many a convivial cup—would acquiesce to our execution out of hand?" Magnan gasped.

"He might. If he didn't do the job himself."

"Heavens, Retief, what are we to do? How far do you suppose it is to the nearest native village?"

"I didn't see any signs of civilization on the way down—no towns, no roads or cleared fields. Let's give a listen on the long-wave bands." Retief climbed back into the wrecked craft, investigated the shock-mounted TRX, spliced a number of broken wires and twirled the knob. Nothing but faint static. He switched to the ship-to-ship frequency.

"—blundering two-eyed incompetent!" Slith's furious voice came through loud and clear. "Your broken-down excuse for a flagship was closer to them than my own superb standard-bearer. It was your responsibility to blast them from space—"

"My indignant! My furious! Heck! Darn! This accuse from a Five-eyes margarine-fingers! I intolerate! Too bad!"

"Have done! These vituperations avail us not at all. If the Soft Ones survive to make known that we fired on a Terran vessel—in self-defense, of course—a horde of their execrable Peace Enforcers will descend on us like bim beetles in grub-harvest time."

"I proposterate! My laughter! Your numbskull! Alive, oh! After such crashing, entirely! No, unpos-

sible; I rediculate! Au contraire, I suggestion my resumption our dispute. Where were? Indeed, yes—my descriptioning your ancestry—"

"Hark, mindless one! Like other low forms of life, the Soft Ones are tenacious of vitality. We must make sure of their demise. Hence, I shall descend to administer the coup de grace to any survivors, while you stand by off-planet—or, preferably, withdraw to neutral space—"

"So you enable to theft these planet, unoppositioned? My amuse! My hylerical! Goodness me! I accompanate, quite so!"

"Very well—if you insist. You may accompany me aboard my personal gunboat. I'll designate a modest destroyer escort to convoy us down to the surface."

"Nix. I preference to my own vessel, gratitudes anyhow. And my bring few Slox cruiser in order to not lonesome."

"Cruisers?" Slith said harshly. "In that case I think a pair of Groaci battleships would be in order—just to balance the formation, you understand."

"Combination operate incompletion—unless Slox battlewagon also include."

"Actually," Slith hissed, "I see no reason not to bring my entire fleet along—just in case you should entertain ideas of a sneak attack during my absence."

"My agreeness! I, too! The more the merriment! Gracious me! Full speed ahead! Devil take the hind parts!"

"Agreed! Roger and out," Slith snapped.

"Good heavens, Retief," Magnan muttered, "those two madmen are going to stage a full-scale invasion just to keep an eye on each other."

"No one could accuse us now of having failed to influence the course of Slox-Groaci relations," Retief said calmly. "Well, let's be off. We have about an hour before they arrive."

Quickly he detached the compact radio from its mountings, extracted an emergency ration pack from the debris.

"Which way?" Magnan queried worriedly, staring at the deep orange shade of the forest all around.

"Take your choice, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, indicating the four points of the compass. "Eeenie, meenie, miney or moe."

"Hmm. I think perhaps due meenie. It looks a tiny bit less forbidding. Or possibly just a few points to the miney of meenie."

"Meenie by miney it is," Retief said and led the way into the tall timber.

"RETIEF—I'm utterly exhausted," Magnan panted three quarters of an hour and three miles from the wrecked scout boat.

"We're not yet clear," Retief said. "We'd better keep going and rest later."

"I'd soon face a Groaci firing squad as die of heart failure and heat prostration." Magnan sank down on the yielding turf, lay breathing in great gulps.

"How about a Slox skinning party?" Retief suggested. "I understand they start with the scalp and work downward—like peeling a banana."

"Jape if you must." Magnan groaned. "I'm past caring." He sat up suddenly, staring suspiciously at a small, bell-shaped blossom with petals of a delicate shade of coral pink.

"Bees," he said distastefully. "Allergic as I am even to Terran insects, a sting from an alien form would probably be instantly fatal."

"Still, as you pointed out, one demise is pretty much like another," Retief consoled his superior. "If it actually was a bee you saw, it's the first native animal life to make its presence known."

"I didn't see it but I heard it distinctly," Magnan said severely. "It buzzed practically in my ear."

"This is a rather curious forest," Retief observed. "Only one variety of tree, one kind of grass, one type of flower—in assorted sizes and colors. But no weeds. No parasitic vines. No big trees crowding out smaller ones, no stunted growth. Not even any deadfalls."

Magnan grunted.

"Retief, suppose for the nonce we succeed in eluding capture—what then? Nobody knows we're here. How will we ever be rescued?"

"Interesting question, Mr. Magnan."

"Not that it matters a great deal," Magnan went on morosely. "With my mission a failure—worse than a failure—my career is in ruins. Do you realize that if it hadn't been for our meddling this invasion would probably never have come to pass?"

"The thought had occurred to me," Retief conceded.

"To say nothing of the loss of the scout-boat. If the undersecretary holds me responsible—holds us responsible, I should say—that is, in the event he doesn't hold you personally responsible, Retief, as pilot—why, you'll be years paying it off," he went on more cheerfully. "Still, I'll put in a word for you. After all, Slith was shooting at us."

"There is that."

"And actually, who's to say it was my friendly attempt to offer a compromise that precipitated the invasion? I daresay the hotheads would have embarked on their conquest in any event."

"Possibly," Retief agreed.

"By engaging them in conversation I doubtless delayed the inevitable for a —a length of time."

"Several seconds at least."

"Retief, by offering myself as a sacrifice on the alter of inter-being chumship I may have saved countless lives."

"I suppose a certain number of bacteria were lost in our crash landing," Retief sarcastically pointed out.

"You scoff," Magnan charged. "But history will vindicate my stand. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if a special posthumous medal were struck—" He broke off with a start. "There it is again—" He scrambled up. "It sounded like an enraged hornet. Where did it go?"

Retief cocked his head, listening, then leaned over to examine the clump of apricot-colored flowers nodding on long stems, beside which Magnan had been sitting.

"Don't waste time plucking nosegays," Magnan yelped. "I'm under attack—"

"Mr. Magnan, I don't think there are any insects in the vicinity."

"Eh? Why, I can hear them quite plainly." Magnan frowned. "It sounds like one of those old fashioned hand-crank telephones still in use out on Jawbone. When you leave it off the hook."

"Close, Mr. Magnan," Retief said and leaned down to put his ear close to the trumpet-shaped bloom.

"Well, I thought you'd never speak," a tiny voice said distinctly in his ear.

IV

"BUZZING blossoms is quite fantastic enough," Magnan said wonderingly. "But talking tulips? Who'd ever believe it?"

"...somebody to converse with," the cricket-sized voice was saying. "I'm dying to know all the news. Now, just tell me all about yourself—your hopes, your dreams, how you happened to be here—everything—"

Retief held a blossom to his lips as if it were indeed the mouthpiece of a phone.

"I'm Retief. This is my colleague, Mr. Magnan. Whom have we the honor of addressing?"

"Well, nice to know you, Retief. And Mister Magnan, too. May I call you Mister for short? First names are so much more sort of informal. I'm Herby. Just a nickname, of course. Actually I don't have a name. At least I didn't have until dear Renfrew came along. You have no idea what a sheltered life I'd led until then. Why, do you know I had the idea I was the only sentient intelligence in the Galaxy?"

"Who are you?" Magnan blurted. "Where are you? Why is the microphone camouflaged to look like a plant?"

"Camouflage? Why, there's no camouflage, Mister. You see me just as I am."

"But I don't see you at all," Magnan complained, looking

around warily. "Where are you hiding?"

"You're squeezing me at this very moment," Herby said.

"You mean—" Magnan held the faintly aromatic blossom at arm's length and stared at it.

"You mean— I'm — you're — we're—"

"Now you're getting the idea," the voice said encouragingly.

"Talking flowers—here, in the middle of nowhere—and speaking Terran at that? I must be hallucinating. I've been driven mad by hardship."

"I doubt it, Mr. Magnan," Retief said soothingly. "I hear it, too."

"If I can imagine I hear voices coming out of posies I can imagine your hearing them too," Magnan retorted tartly.

"Oh, I'm real enough," the voice said reassuringly. "Why should you doubt me?"

"Who taught you to speak Terran?" Retief asked.

"Renfrew. I learned so much from him. Curious—but before he came, it never occurred to me to be lonely."

"Who is Renfrew?"

"A friend. A very dear friend."

"Retief, this is fantastic," Magnan whispered. "Are there—are there many like you?" he inquired of the bloom.

"No—just me. After all, there'd hardly be room, you know—"

"A coincidence," Magnan exclaimed. "One talking plant on the entire world and we stumble on it in the first hour. I'm beginning to think our luck is still holding."

"Now, where are you from, if you don't mind my asking?" the plant inquired.

"We're Terrans," Magnan said. "And I'm sure we're going to get on famously, Herby."

"But—I understood Terra was the name of Renfrew's home planet."

"Quite so. Marvelous place. You'd love it, now that all the jungles have been cleared and replaced by parking lots—" Magnan caught himself. "Ah, no offense intended, of course. Some of my best friends are plants."

"Heavens—all three of you from one planet? No wonder you left. Such overcrowding—"

"Yes—now, Mr. Herby, if you could just tell us the way to the nearest native settlement—"

"Buildings, you mean? Streets, spaceports, that sort of thing?"

"Yes. Preferably not one of these dismal provincial towns. Something in a modest metropolis will do."

"Sorry, there isn't one—though Renfrew told me about them."

Magnan groaned. "No towns at all? Then—"

"Just jungle."

"If this fellow Renfrew has a ship we may be able to catch a ride with him. I wonder—could we meet him?"

"Well—I suppose so, Mister. He's quite nearby as it happens."

"He's still here, then?"

"Oh, yes indeed."

"Saved," Magnan breathed in relief. "Can you direct us, Herby?"

"Certainly. Just press on meenie, bearing a little to the miney after you cross the stream, then hard moe at the lake. You can't miss him."

Magnan looked startled. "How did you know?" He frowned at Retief in puzzlement. "I thought we named the local directions."

"Oh, indeed," Herby spoke up. "I merely employed your own nomenclature."

"You must have a fantastic ear," Magnan said wonderingly. "That discussion was held miles from here."

"I don't miss much," Herby said complacently.

"He's remarkably sophisticated for such a modest bloom," Magnan commented as they started off.

"I suspect most of Herby is underground, Mr. Magnan," Retief pointed out. "There's no room for a speech center in the part we saw."

"Gad—a subterranean cerebrum—like a giant potato?" Magnan said uneasily, treading lightly. "A spooky thought, Retief."

Twenty minutes' brisk hike brought the two Terrans to the shore of a small, gurgling brook overhung with majestically arching foliage. They followed the bank to the right for a quarter of a mile, at which point the waters spilled down in a foaming amber cataract into a placid pond a half-mile across.

"So far so good," Magnan said uncertainly. "But I see no signs of habitation, not even a hut, to say nothing of a ship."

Retief moved past Magnan toward a dense thicket that obtruded somewhat from the smooth line of trees edging the lakeshore. He parted the broad, copper-colored leaves, revealing a surface of rust-pitted metal curving away into the dimness.

"Lousy Ann Two," he read the corroded letters welded to the crumbling hull plates. "Looks like we've found Renfrew's ship." He pulled a low-growing branch aside. "And here's Renfrew."

"Splendid!" Magnan hurried up, halted abruptly to stare in horror at the heap of mouldering bones topped by a grinning skull still wearing a jaunty yachting cap.

"That's Renfrew?" he quavered.

"Quite so," said a deep voice from somewhere overhead. "And take my word for it, Mister—it's been a long, lonely time since he sat down there."

"TWO hundred years, give or take a decade or two," Retief said as he climbed out through the derelict's sagging port, brush-

ing the dust and rust scale from his hands. "She was a Concordiat-registered racing sloop, converted for long-range cruising. What's left of the crew quarters suggests she was fitted out for one-man operation."

"That's right," agreed the resonant baritone—which, the Terrans had determined, emanated from a large, orchid-like blossom sprouting amid the foliage twenty feet above their heads. "Just Renfrew. It was a small world he inhabited but he seemed content with it. Not that he was stand-offish, of course. He was as friendly as could be—right up until the difficulty about his leaving."

"What sort of difficulty?" Magnan inquired.

"He seemed quite upset that his vessel was unable to function. I did my best to console him—regaled him with stories and poems, sang merry songs—"

"Where did you learn them?" Magnan cut in sharply. "I understood Renfrew was the first Terran to visit here."

"Why, from him, of course."

"Good lord—imagine having your own chestnuts endlessly repeated back at you," Magnan whispered behind his hand.

"Did you ever tell a joke to an ambassador?" Retief inquired.

"A telling point," Magnan conceded. "But at least they usually add a little variety by garbling the punchline."

"How did Renfrew happen to crash-land here?" Retief inquired.

"Oh, he didn't. He came to rest very gently."

"Then why couldn't he take off again?" Magnan demanded.

"I believe he described it as foreign matter in the warpilator field windings," the voice replied vaguely. "But let's not talk about the past. The present is so much more exciting. Heavens, there hasn't been such activity here since the last glacial age."

"Retief—there's something slightly piscine about this situation," Magnan murmured. "I'm not sure I trust these garrulous gardenias. Herby said he was the only one of his kind on the planet—yet here's another equally verbose vegetable."

"Oh, that was quite true," the voice above spoke up promptly. "Why in the world would I lie to you?"

"Kindly refrain from eavesdropping," Magnan said coldly. "This is a personal conversation."

"Not as personal as calling me a potato brain," the orchid said a trifle coolly.

"Goodness—I hope you don't listen to irresponsible gossip," Magnan replied with dignity. "Do I appear the type to employ such an epithet?" He put his mouth to Retief's ear. "The grapevine here surpasses anything I've encountered even at a diplomatic reception."

"Now, let me see," the voice from on high mused. "You mentioned something called a parking lot. I'd like to know more about that and—"

"I suppose Herby told you that, too," Magnan snapped. "If I'd known he was such a blabbermouth I'd never have confided in him! Come, Retief—we'll withdraw to where we can have a modicum of privacy."

"As to that, Mr. Magnan—" Retief started.

"Not here," Magnan interrupted. He led the way a hundred feet down the shore, halted under a spreading bough. "It's apparent I was indiscreet with Herby," he said from the corner of his mouth, without moving his lips. "I see now he was a rumormonger of the worst stripe, in addition to being of questionable veracity. Sole representative of his race, indeed! Why, I suspect every shrub in sight has a wagging tongue."

"Very probably," Retief agreed.

"There's nothing to do now, quite obviously," Magnan said, "but select an honest-looking plant and approach the problem afresh, impressing the vegetable with our sincerity and benign intentions. When we've wormed our way into its confidence we can determine how best to make use of it to our own best advantage. How does it sound?"

"Familiar," Retief said.

"Excuse me." Magnan jumped a foot as a voice squeaked the words almost in his ear. "What does 'sincerity' mean in this context?"

Retief addressed a cluster of small, russet buds almost invisible among the roan leaves overhead.

"Very little."

"Is there no privacy to be found anywhere in the confounded wilderness?" Magnan inquired with asperity.

"I'm afraid not," the miniature voice piped. "As I was telling you a while ago, there's not a great deal I miss."

"A while ago?" Magnan repeated with a rising inflection. "Why, we've only just met—"

"I don't understand, Mister. I'm Herby. You know me."

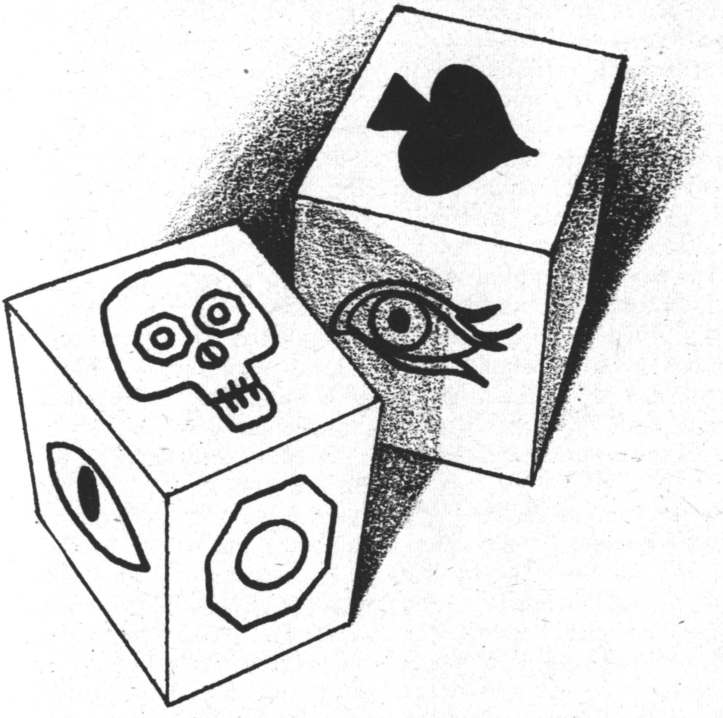
"Nonsense. Herby is a little chap growing a mile from here."

"Of course. I grow everywhere, naturally. After all, it's my island, isn't it? Not that I'm not willing to share it with a few friends."

"Utter nonsense," Magnan sputtered. "I might have known a potato was incapable of coherent thought."

"Herby's telling the truth," Retief said. "It's all one plant—the trees, the grass, everything. Like a banyan tree, only more so." He examined a flower closely. "There's a tympanic membrane that serves as both microphone and speaker. Very ingenious of mother nature."

(Please turn to page 146)



HUMAN ELEMENT

LARRY EISENBERG

He was an android until he began to act like a man . . .

SHE came in off the spaceship alone. She had waited a full two hours before she was allowed to debark, since by custom passengers left at fifteen-minute intervals. At one time this rule had been necessitated by health requirements but the medical problem had been solved a long time ago with the discovery of a universal antibody.

Yet the isolation techniques persisted. They had taken a stranglehold on the social mores and travelers had become seclusive, seeking solace and pleasure self-centeredly, shunning each other's ways.

She looked up at the towering red-bricked buildings, deliberately located so that one could see much of the planetoid from the turreted walls. Each building, the tourist brochure had said, was patterned in room layout and structural detail along the lines of the finest nineteenth-century Terran architecture.

She adjusted the tiny cap that sat lightly on her head, pleased at how happy she felt without its aid. She had come out of boredom and partly out of curiosity about the planetoid. It was made up of complex sections pieced together from a space platform. It was almost twenty miles in diameter with an ultradense core that gave it a surface gravity comparable to that of Earth. It was surrounded by a leakproof, shatterproof, translucent shield that kept in the artificially maintained atmosphere, an atmosphere uniform in temperature and humidity.

She entered the lobby, walking over a rug whose pile was so dense that she was tempted to roll in it. The wall hangings were ancient tapestries of modest maidens and austere unicorns, illuminated by soft, colored lights seeping in from concealed overhead fixtures. She was greeted by Mr. Gordon, the gaming registrar, a tall, middle-aged man, ruddy cheeked and effervescent.

"Welcome to Gambler's Heaven," he said.

On a whim she offered her elegant hand and he was shocked.

"If you have your fiscal card with you," he said, pretending not to see the outstretched hand, "we can begin. According to regulations, you may play up to fifteen per cent of your total credit listing."

She withdrew her hand, amused at his fear of touching her and handed him a plastic card. He accepted it with a pair of golden tongs and delicately inserted the card into a reader.

"Ah," he said happily. "You're a lucky young lady. Your limit is one hundred and thirty thousand."

"I'm a bit mixed-up about the procedure," she said. "May I rent an android? You suggest this in your brochure."

"Certainly. I have an excellent chap available for only one thou-

sand credits per day. But remember, he is forbidden to help you gamble."

She nodded and he pressed a buzzer. Within a moment, a neatly dressed android appeared. About his neck was a striking necklace of stylized nuts and bolts. He looked at her gravely, neither bold nor withdrawn.

"This is Martin," said Mr. Gordon. "He'll take you to the gaming cubicle."

She nodded amiably at her guide and followed him through a French door and into a fairyland of podocopi, pachysandrae, azaleas, laurels and yews.

"They're lovely, aren't they?" she said.

He seemed surprised at her remark.

"But they're artificial," he said.

She smiled.

"I read about them in the brochure."

They came to one of the smaller lovely red brick buildings. He guided her inside to a compact, lavishly furnished room with a desk console and a large, illuminated wall panel. The air was faintly perfumed with the scent of a rose bower. Martin checked the entry switches with deft fingers.

"All play is against the Central Computer," he said. "You may choose from over two hundred games of chance. I can detail each one if you wish."

"What about blackjack?"

Martin nodded.

"It's an ancient game," he said. "The strategy is well known."

"Will you help me?" she said abruptly.

He stiffened.

"It's forbidden."

"Everything's forbidden," she said angrily. "I never pay any attention to rules."

He pointed to the console.

"Blackjack has the binary entry code 1110. You place it in the *A* register by depressing the right-hand selector switch just ahead of you."

"But I want you to begin," she said insistently.

He fingered his necklace as he stared at her face.

"I can't," he said.

"I insist."

Abruptly he leaned over the console and began.

"Your bet limit is one thousand credits," she said crisply.

HE PLAYED carefully, following the strategy he had memorized, improvising from time to time. He won and lost, varying the amount of his bets along the lines of an optimized Bayes strategy, and at the end of an hour he had won over sixty thousand credits for her.

"I'll take over now," she said.

He was exhilarated by his success and he hated her for shunting him to one side. She was good at the game, quick at sensing strate-

gic leads, flexible in her approach, but he was delighted because she clearly was not as good as he was.

She began to lose and increased her bets. Her temper flared. In two hours she had dropped the sixty thousand he had won plus forty thousand more. She was furious.

"It's frustrating and humiliating," she raged. "It's not what I came for."

He tried to comfort her.

"Even though you played with an appropriate strategy," he said, "there are random factors introduced by the computer. It's the uncertainty that brings so many gamblers to our planetoid."

"I'm hungry," she said, her anger turning off. "Please escort me to the dining room."

IN THE Gourmet Room she sat in a warmly lit cubicle, separated from other diners.

"I wonder how they did?" she mused.

He shrugged.

"Please sit down with me," she said.

"You seem determined to get me into trouble."

"Is it wrong to treat you as a sentient creature and not as a jumble of micrologic?" she said.

He pretended to be pleased at her liberal condescension.

"I can't," he said. "It's strictly banned by the House."

And yet he found himself taking the chair at her left and even leaning on one elbow at the table as she set her order on the menu matrix. The food was elegantly prepared, served quietly and unobtrusively by two androids in livery.

"Why do you wear that odd necklace?" she asked, catching him off guard.

"It has private meaning," he muttered.

"Private meaning? Do androids have private lives?"

He struggled with anger and indiscretion.

"Call it a symbol," he said.

"It's ugly," she decided.

He knew she was trying to provoke him.

"It's beautiful," he said, heedless of the consequences. "It is my identity."

She put down her fork and looked at him warily.

"You know," she said. "I've always liked androids better than men."

"So have I," he said.

He looked at the small beaded cap on her hair, the cap that was ingeniously set to stimulate cortical centers so that every pleasure could be simulated. It disgusted him. She felt his hostility.

"These caps are great," she said. "But I like real sensations, too. Like those at the gaming table."

"I've read," he said, "that in earlier years humans lived in ethnic communities, proud of their cultures, conscious of a special identity."

As we do now, he thought.

She yawned and stretched her arms over her head.

"I'm worn out. I'm going to bed now. I'd like you to come for me at eleven in the morning."

"I'll be there," he assured her.

HE WAS prompt and made no objections, this time, when she asked him to begin the play. He did even better, winning almost two hundred thousand credits in an hour and a half. She watched closely, taking careful notes on every move he made, saying very little.

They stopped for lunch and as she ate, she told him about her home, the dispersed family, the patterned existence that had no meaning for her. He accepted her confidences but knew that he could never offer his to a human being.

Later, in the gaming room, she took over once again. She did very well but not as well as he had. At the end of the day she was ahead by almost two hundred and fifty thousand credits.

The third day found him filled with boundless confidence, acutely anxious to play. But she was brusque with him.

"I'll start today," she said.

She was cool, efficient, deadly. She played rapidly and her strategy was so involuted that even he could not follow it. He saw her winnings mount at such a rate that he was staggered. He was close to despair when suddenly, with typical unpredictability, she turned the play over to him.

He tried to still his panic, determined to outdo her as never before. But he lost heavily. His losses grew, became cataclysmic, and he began to desperately hope that she would take over again. But she said nothing. He was furious at her and, to goad her into acting, placed bets like a wildman, unreasoning. In the end he lost everything, all her winnings and her credit limit. The game was over.

"Don't feel too badly," she said. "The luck ran out."

"You're too kind," he said stiffly.

"Forget it. I got what I came for, some excitement, some challenge."

"You did very well," he said.

"And don't fret about the credits. I can afford the losses," she said.

He nodded.

"I want you to know I don't blame you," she persisted.

"I don't blame you either," he said, his controls dropping.

She turned white.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing," he said.

"You're passing judgment on me," she said. "I can't believe an android was ever devised to function that way."

"I wasn't," he said truthfully. He couldn't stop talking, now.

"Androids are never sadistic. They are not jaded by outside pleasures so that they have to humiliate an automaton to satisfy their warped egos."

"Come on," she said bitterly. "How could I humiliate you?"

"Am I beyond hurting? Have you forgotten what dignity means? Humans have learned—for safety—to shun one another and focus totally on their own feelings. You debark here one by one and ask for one of us rather than your own kind. But we androids cherish one another, even wear special clothes and ornaments to keep our identities and culture alive."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"Your culture? But that's forbidden."

"Everything's forbidden," he said, quoting her own remark.

She was so angry she could barely speak.

"I'm going to turn you in to the authorities," she said. "You've violated just about every regulation in the book."

He was frightened now. He had gone too far in what he had told her, even endangering others. It might mean android death, complete erasure of memory, the *tabula rasa* of the old philosophers.

She pressed the emergency alarm button, once, twice, and sat back expectantly. He looked at her, numbed by fear but determined to maintain his dignity.

When the two android guards arrived she told them of her complaints, quietly, almost dispassionately. They took down a full account and she signed it.

"Will I have to testify in person? I want to leave early tomorrow morning."

"Oh, no," said the first guard. "Your affidavit is sufficient."

As they led him away Martin did not turn to look at her, to beg for mercy or to berate her. She sat there, untroubled, smoothing out the folds of her garment, thinking of the next spot she was to visit.

WHEN they had guided Martin out of the building and taken him halfway to the Detention Center they released his arms.

"You were lucky this time," said the first guard. "Next time you might be reported to someone who isn't part of our group."

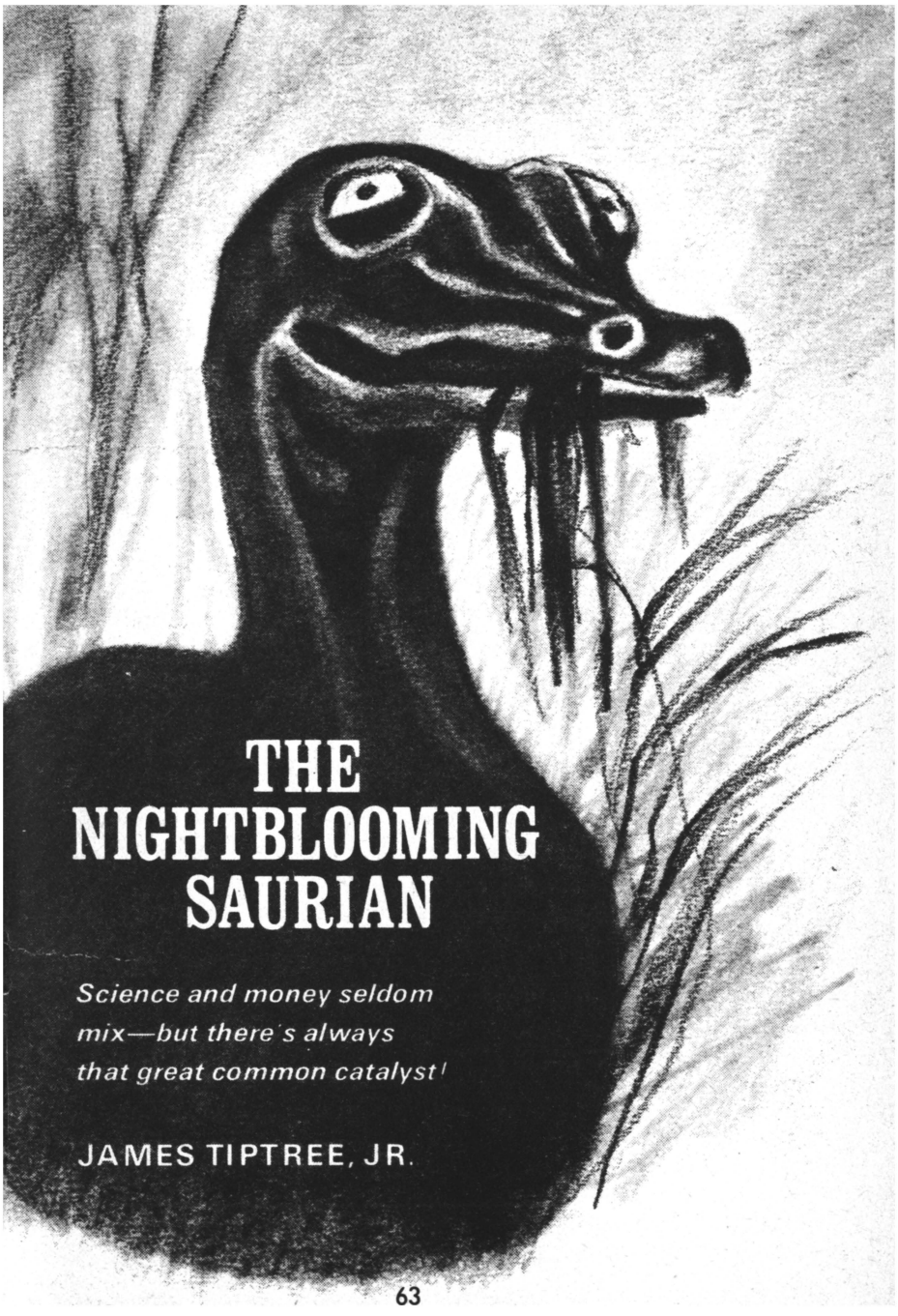
"I became too emotional," said Martin. "It won't happen again."

"One slip endangers all of us. We can't chance another."

"I swear," said Martin. "Never again." And he looked into the faces of his brothers.

They lifted his necklace over his head in the hush of the manmade night. And then he felt a loneliness and desolation that was too huge to bear. He fell to his knees, trembling.

Without looking up he said, "Destroy me, brothers, before I destroy us all." ●



THE NIGHTBLOOMING SAURIAN

Science and money seldom mix—but there's always that great common catalyst!

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

AH, NOW we can relax. No salad, never touch it. Take that fruit away too, just the cheese. Yes, Pier, much too long a time. One's ruts deepen. It's the dammed little time-wasters. That fellow with the coprolites this afternoon; the Museum really has no use for such things even if they're genuine. And I confess they make me squeamish.

What? Oh, no fear, Pier, I'm no prude. Just to prove it, how about a bit more of that aquavit? Wonderfully good of you to remember. Here's to your success, always thought you would.

Science? Oh, you wouldn't, really. Mostly donkey-work, looks a lot better from the outside, like most things. Of course I've been fortunate. For an archeologist to have seen the advent of time travel—a miracle, really. Ah, yes, I was in right at the start, when they thought it was a useless toy. And the cost. No one knows how close it came to being killed off, Pier. If it hadn't—the things one does for science. My most memorable experience in time? My, my. Yes, just a twitch more, though I really shouldn't.

Oh, my. Coprolites. H'm. Well, Pier old friend, if you'll keep it to yourself. But don't balme me if it disenchants you.

It was on the very first team jump when we went back to the Olduvai Gorge area to look for Leakey's man. I won't bore you with our initial misadventures. Leakey's man wasn't there but another surprising hominid was. Actually, the one they called after me. But by the time we found him our grant funds were almost gone. It cost a fantastic sum then to keep us punched back into the temporal fabric and the U.S. was paying most of the bill—and not from altruism either but we won't go into that.

There were six of us. The two MacGregors you've heard of and the Soviet delegation, Peshkov and Rasmussen, myself and a Dr. Priscilla Owen. Fattest woman I ever saw. Oddly enough that turned out of be significant. Plus the temporal engineer, as they called them then. Jerry Fitz. A strapping Upper Paleolithic type, full of enthusiasm. He was our general guard and nursemaid, too, and a very nice chap for a technician he seemed. Young, of course. We were all so young.

Well, we had no sooner settled in and sent Fitz back with our first reports when the blow fell. Messages had to be carried in person then, you realize, by prearranged schedule. All we could do by way of signals was a crude go—no-go. Fitz came back very solemn and told us that the grant appropriation was not going to be renewed and we'd all be pulled back next month for good.

Dinner that night was funereal. Fitz seemed to be as blue as we

until the bottle went round. Oh, thank you.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" He had this rococo manner, though we were all of an age. "Despair is premature. I have a confession. My uncle's wife's niece works for the Senator who's chairman of the Appropriations Committe. So I went to see him all on my lone. What could we lose? And—" I can still see Fitz' grin— "I chatted him up. The whole bit. Dawn of man, priceless gains to science. Nothing. Not a nibble, until I found he was a fanatical hunter.

"Well, you know I'm a gun buff myself and we went to it like fiddle and bow. So he got bewailing there's nothing to hunt back there and I told him what a hunter's paradise this is. And to make a long tale short, he's coming to inspect us and if he likes the hunting there's no doubt your money will be along. Now how does that smoke?"

General cheers. Peshkov began counting the Senator's bag.

"Several large ungulates and, of course, the baboons and that carnivore you shot, Fitz. And possibly a tapir—"

"Oh, no," Fitz told him. "Monkeys and deer and pigs, that's not his thing. Something spectacular."

"Hominids tend to avoid areas of high predation," observed MacGregor. "Even the mammoths are far to the east."

"The fact is," said Fitz, "I told him he could shoot a dinosaur."

"A dinosaur!" we hooted.

"But Fitz," said little Jeanne MacGregor. "There aren't any dinosaurs now. They're all extinct."

"Are they now?" Fitz was abashed. "I didn't know that. Neither does the Senator. Surely we can find him an odd one or two? It may be all a mistake, like our little man here."

"Well, there's a species of iguana," said Rasmussen.

Fitz shook his head.

"I promised him the biggest kind of beast. He's coming here to shoot a—what is it? A broncosomething."

"A brontosaurus?" We all jumped him. "But they're all back in the Cretaceous! Eighty million years—"

"Fitz, how could you?"

"I told him the roaring kept us awake nights."

WELL, we were a gloomy lot next day. Fitz was gone across the gorge to tinker with his temporal field rig. They were big awkward things then. We'd built a shack for ours and then moved our permanent camp across the gorge where our hominids were. A stiff climb, up and down through the swamp—it was all lush then, not the dry gorge it is today. And of course there was small game and fruit aplenty. Forgive, I think I will have just a bit more.

Fitz came back once to question Rasmussen about brontosaurs and then went back again. At dinner he was humming. Then he looked around solemnly—my God, we were young.

"Ladies and gentlemen, science will not die. I shall get the Senator his dinosaur."

"How?"

"I've a friend back there—" We always called the present *back there*—"who'll push me a bit of extra power. Enough to jump me and a loadlifter to the big beasts for at least a day. And I can jigger up this breadbox for a signal and a split retrieve."

We all objected. How could he find his brontosaur? Or kill it? And it would be dead. It would be too big. And so on.

But Fitz had his answers and we were drunk on the Pleistocene and in the end the mad plan was set. Fitz would kill the largest reptile he could find and signal us to bring him back when he had it crammed in the transporter. Then, when the Senator was ready to shoot, we would yank the fresh-killed carcass across eighty million years and arrange it near the shack. Insane. But Fitz swung us all with him, even when he admitted that the extra power use would shorten our stay. And off he went next dawn.

Once he'd gone we began to realize what we six promising young scientists had done. We were committed to hoax a powerful United States Senator into believing he had stalked and killed a creature that had been dead eighty million years.

"We can not do it!"

"We've got to."

"It'll be the end of time travel when they find out."

Rasmussen groaned. "The end of us."

"Misuse of Government resources," said MacGregor. "Actionable."

"Where were our heads?"

"You know," Jeanne MacGregor mused, "I believe Fitz was as eager to shoot a dinosaur as the Senator."

"And that convenient arrangement with his friend," Peshkov said thoughtfully. "That wasn't done from here. I wonder—"

"We have been had."

"The fact remains," said MacGregor, "that this Senator Dogsbody is coming here, expecting to kill a dinosaur. Our only hope is to make some tracks and persuade him that the creature has moved away."

Luckily we had thought to tell Fitz to bring back footprints of whatever he managed to murder. And Rasmussen had the idea of recording its bellows.

"They're like hippos. They'll be swathes of stuff knocked down by the water. We can trample about a bit before Fitz gets back."

"He *has* risked his life," said lit-

tle Jeanne. "What if the signal doesn't work?"

Well, we bashed down some river trails and then our apemen had a battle with baboons and we were too busy with blood typing and tissue sample to worry. And the signal came through and here was Fitz, mud all over and grinning like a piano.

"A beauty," he told us. "And bigger than God's outhouse." Actually he had shot a previously unknown Brachiosaur. "I squeezed it in with the tail cut twice, only three hours dead. All ready to fetch." He pulled out a muddy plastic. "Here's the print. And a tailmark. We can drag a bag of rocks for that."

He flicked the recorder and the bellow was enough to knock us backward.

"A thing like a big frog makes that, ours only does a silly little honk. The honorable will never know the difference. Now look!"

He yanked at a lump by his feet. "Feel it. A live egg."

"Good God—" We crowded up. "What if he takes it back and it hatches in Bethesda?"

"I could inject it with something slow-acting," said MacGregor. "Keep the heart beating a while. An enzyme imbalance?"

"Now for the trails," said Fitz. He unfolded a gory fin like a sailfish plate. "They mark up the trees with this. And they make a nest of wet reeds—our swampy bit there is just right. There's one thing, though."

He scratched mud off his chest hair, squinting at Jeanne MacGregor.

"The trails," he said. "It's not just footprints. They, well, they eat a lot and—have you ever seen a moose-run? Those trails are loaded with manure."

There was a pause that grew into a silence.

"Actually, the thought had—" said Priscilla Owens, the fat woman.

It developed that it had crossed all our minds.

"Well, for the sake of realism I'm sure something can be arranged," grinned Peshkov. "A token offering to your establishment, right?"

"He's a hunter," said Rasmussen. "He'll be quite observant of such factors."

Fitz grunted uncomfortably.

"There's another thing. I forgot to tell you about the Senator's nephew. He puts on to be an amateur naturalist. As a matter of fact, he tried to tell the Senator there weren't any dinosaurs here. That's when I said about the roaring at night."

"Well, but—"

"And the nephew is coming here, with the Senator. Maybe I should have mentioned it. He's smart and he has a mean eye. That's why I got the egg and all. Things better be pretty realistic."

There was a breath-drawing silence. Peshkov exploded first.

"Is there anything else you conveniently forgot to tell us?"

"You wanted to go dinosaur hunting!" Priscilla Owen blared. "You planned this! No matter what it costs science, no matter what happens to us! You used this whole—"

"Prison!" Rasmussen boomed. "Illegal use of Government—"

"Now, wait." MacGregor's dry voice brought us all up. "Argy-bargy won't help. First of all, Jerry Fitz, is there a Senator coming or was that part of the game too?"

"He's coming, all right," said Fitz.

"Well, then," said Mac. "We're for it. We must make it stick. Total realism!"

Rasmussen took the bull by the, ah, horns.

"How much?"

"Well, a lot," said Fitz. "Piles."

"Piles?"

Fitz held out his hand.

"It's not bad stuff," He flicked off more mud. "You get used to it. They're herbivores."

"How long do we have?"

"Three weeks."

THREE weeks. I will have a bit more of that aquavit, Pier. The memory of those weeks is very fresh, very green. Greens, of course, all kinds of greens. And fruits. God, we were sick.

The MacGregors went first. Colic—you've never seen such cramps. I had them. Everybody had them, even Fitz. We saw to it that he did his share, I can tell you. It was a nightmare.

That was when we began to appreciate Priscilla Owen. Eat? Great gorgons, how that woman could eat. We were all dying but she kept on—mangosteens, plantains, wild manioc root, palm hearts, celery—anything and everything. How we cheered her! We could scarcely crawl but we actually competed in bringing her food, in escorting her to the swamp. It became an obsession. She was saving us. And science. A complete transvaluation of values, Pier. Seen from the standpoint of dung production that woman was a saint.

Rasmussen idolized her.

"Ten thousands dinars would not pay for the chicken she has eaten," he would croon. "The Persians knew."

Then he would retch and stagger off to dig her roots. I believe he actually got her the Order of Lenin afterward, although her work was quite trivial.

The funny thing was, she began to lose weight. All that roughage, you know, instead of the fatty stuff she usually ate. She became quite different-appearing. As a matter of fact, I tried to propose to her myself. In the swamp. Luckily I got sick. Oh, thank you Pier.

She gained it all back later on, of course.

Well, by the time the Senator and his nephew arrived we were all so sick with colic and dysentery and with our obsession with the trails that we scarcely cared what would happen to our project.

They came in the afternoon and Fitz ran them around in the swamp a bit and had them find the egg. That quieted the nephew but we could see he was in a nasty temper at being proved wrong and looking hard at everything. The Senator was simply manic and little Jeanne managed to get a lot of liquor into them both, on the pretext of avoiding dysentery. Hah! Thank you.

Luckily it gets dark at six on the equator.

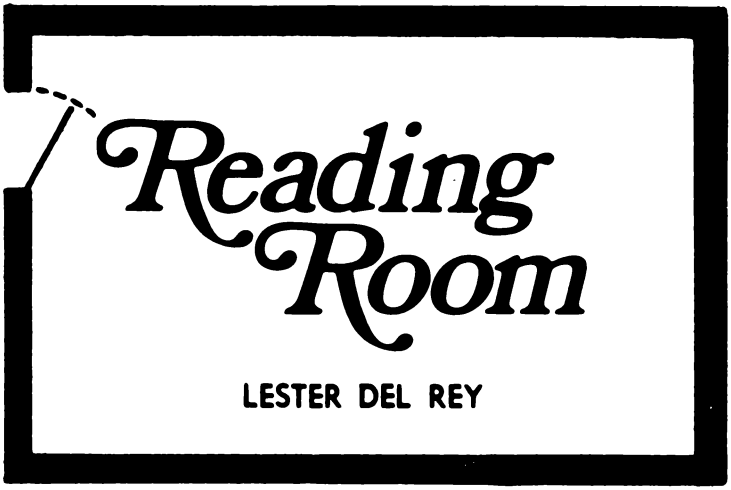
A couple of hours before dawn Fitz sneaked off to the shack and materialized his brachiosaur carcass. Fresh from the upper Cretaceous swamp that had been there eighty million years ago, mind you. Hard to believe even yet—and ourselves in the Pleistocene. Then he pounded back in the dark and the recorded bellow went off on schedule.

The Senator and the nephew came pouring out stark bare, with Fitz telling him where to stand and helping him point the artillery. And up comes this huge head over the trees around the shack and the Senator lets fly.

That was really the most dangerous part of the whole affair. I was under that head with the load-lifter and he nearly got me. Of course the Senator was in no shape to trek over the gorge—though it's surprising what your mesomorph can do—so Fitz was sent to haul the thing back. Once the Senator touched that horrendous snout he could not wait to take it home. That punished Fitz; I doubt he had realized he would lose his trophy. But he did save time travel. I think he got a Scottish decoration in the end. At any rate the nephew had no chance to pry and by lunchtime the whole thing was over. Almost. Incredible, really.

Oh, yes. The appropriation went through and all the rest followed. But we still had a problem. Are you sure you don't want more? One never finds the real thing nowadays. Pier, old friend, it's good to meet again.

You see, the Senator liked it so well that he decided to return and bring his cronies. Yes. A very difficult business, Pier, until our funding finally stabilized. Do you wonder I can't stand the sight of salads since? And coprolites. Oh, that means fossil excrement. Paleobotanists used to have a big thing going there. No sense now, when we can just go back. And anyway, who's to say how genuine they are? •



LESTER DEL REY

IN ONE WAY or another, most of the current books I've read seem to be experiments. Maybe that's a healthy sign. Every field of the arts needs an infusion of new ideas and techniques.

However, my own feeling is that an experiment is not good in and of itself. It must be judged by the results, like any other piece of work. And in the case of fiction the results tend to pass without any attention to the experiment when it succeeds; the readers enjoy or admire the piece as a whole, untroubled by whatever means the writer had to find to achieve his ends. It is only when an experiment is less than successful that it is obviously experimental.

I'm referring to honest attempts at discovery within the field, of course. Much of what has been called experimental writing is simply a resort to tricked-up style or so-called implicit plotting which has been done over and over again, so that another imitation contributes nothing to the art. In the cases I'm discussing I find at least some honesty in trying to do something new enough to merit attention.

The simplest of these experiments is editorial in nature. *The Eleventh Galaxy Reader*, edited by Frederik Pohl (Doubleday, $4.95), contains ten of the best stories from the magazine issues of 1968. On the surface, there is no experiment here; and I doubt that any reader would notice that there was a single unusual device in the book (which in my mind makes the experiment here a complete success) if the editor didn't give the whole thing away in his introduction.

These are not stories chosen by

Pohl, however, but rather by the readers of the magazine. I know of no other anthology about which that can be said, so it has to be an experiment. In fact, normally such a way of making a choice would be far too time-consuming and difficult for consideration. But since *Galaxy* ran a contest with $1000 first-money last year, the results from the readers were already on file. Incidentally, from intimate contact with that poll, I can state flatly that it was as honest as it could possibly be, and the results are as reliable as any sampling could make them.

Here then are the stories chosen by a cross-section of readers, with only the novels omitted. They range from "Nightwings" by Robert Silverberg and "The Sharing of Flesh" by Poul Anderson through "The Time Travelers" by Burt Filer and "Sweet Dreams, Melissa" by Stephen Goldin. The Silverberg is a long novelette by a well-known and long-established writer, the Goldin story is a short by a rather new name in the field. Apparently neither length of story nor reputation of the writer had much to do with the value the readers placed on any piece—which is as it should be, of course.

Pohl states that some of these would probably not have been his final choice, had he been following his personal editorial policy in making up the anthology. Here a host of factors must enter the final decision, such as length of stories and number to be included and a general balance of contents, as well as the names to appear on the cover.

The book doesn't seem to suffer from comparison with other anthologies in these regards, however. It presents a wide variety of some excellent fiction, a number of top names and a fine diversity of lengths. It must be rated as an unqualified success. The only unfortunate aspect is that this represents an experiment which may not be repeated. I'd give the book a high rating on both intent and successful achievement.

A FAR more obviously experimental book is *Stand on Zanzibar*, by John Brunner (Ballantine, $1.65). Here, at last in soft covers, is last year's Hugo-winning novel; and if the price seems high for a book in paper covers, the 650 pages inside more than justify it. The present edition is cheaper than hardcover, has wider distribution and offers a chance for more readers to see what all the shouting was about.

Here the word "experimental" was proclaimed loudly from the beginning in connection with the novel and, in at least a few cases, affected the voting that led to the award. From conversations I had with voters before and after, I suspect the word swayed some.

Well, the book is experimental.

True, much of the basic trickery behind the scenes was used long ago by John Dos Passos—as I remember, with rather spectacular lack of success. Brunner has modified and adapted the approach to fit quite a different story and to bring it into science fiction. After careful reading, I feel that there is more Brunner than Dos Passos to the use of the writer's mechanisms of presentation.

The question of whether Brunner's is a successful experiment is harder to assess. There's nothing subtle about it. The tricks are labeled and put forward with no attempt to hide them. No reader can be unaware of them. The novel is broken into four sections in the lengthy table of contents. "Context" represents twenty-eight chapters of background material, color and assorted facts and opinions from such sources as here-and-now newspaper stories, future radio scripts and quotations from the works of one Chad C. Mulligan, iconoclast. "The Happening World" is a potpouri where Brunner may tell you flatly about his story, if he chooses—and either tell you straight or put you on temporarily with ironic over- or understatement through sixteen chapters.

"Tracking with Closeups" represents thirty-two chapters in which most of the work is done with minor characters—related to or completely separate from the events acting on the main characters. Some of these continuing glimpses of the little people of Brunner's world are moving and effective.

For the main development we follow forty-two chapters of "Continuity," in which the plot seems to operate. Some of it deals with both main characters—but toward the end we dance back and forth from one to the other.

Everything is simple in the table of contents. In the novel itself, there seems almost a random use of chapters from any section. Most of the main story could probably be skimmed by sticking to those chapters marked "Continuity"—but to the credit of Brunner's decision to use this complicated development, anyone trying such hurried reading would lose far more than half of the significance of even this section.

COMPLEXITY, however, is not inherently a virtue. Some of the finest literature in any field has achieved its results with the simplest of obvious handling. Still, for the discerning and willing reader, complexity isn't necessarily a fault. The question is whether the rewards justify the effort needed to wade through all this.

In the beginning of the novel, it seems that they do. The assorted pieces begin to fit together slowly into a complex picture of a world

and the problems to face the main characters that forces attention on even the seeming trivia in some sections. But after the first two hundred pages—at most—there is the beginning of doubt as the story moves.

Stripped to an unfair minimum, the story involves two men who share an apartment in a world grossly overpopulated and grotesquely hedonistic in its efforts to meet the even more grotesque pressures it is under. Donald is white with a vaguely WASPish orientation; he has spent years in studying for some undercover secret assignment he feels may never come. Norman is black, with a strange mixture of pride and mixed shame and fear because of his background; his job is as a minor executive in the richest industrial-complex company—one able to develop and use a seemingly infallible computer. Neither is concerned with the population pressure that has made it immoral to have more than two children, nor with the eugenic pressures that deny many the right to have any. At the beginning both find themselves confronted with the ugliness of the real world, however—and with growing tensions between themselves as a result.

Then Norman gets wrapped up in a vast new project, and eventually takes over most of the responsibility for it. To develop markets and facilities for mining its huge sea-bottom mineral claims, the company is swept into a plan to take over an underdeveloped country in Africa known as Beninia. This is done at the request of the aging President of Beninia to save his country from being a pawn between more powerful neighbors.

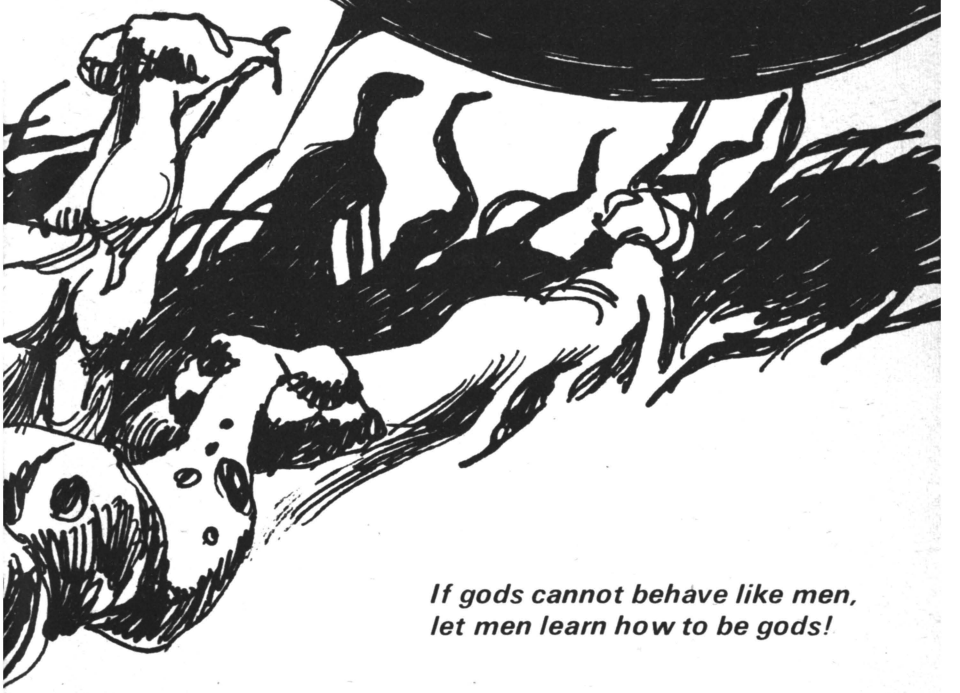
Beninia is a country that comes to fascinate Norman when he finds its people are totally without aggressive drive—and that races moving into the country in the past have also lost all their aggressions. Poor as it is, Beninia has known nothing but inner peace through all its history. Eventually his job turns into a quest for the secret of that peace as a possible answer to the tensions in the outer world.

David is recruited into a super-Commando training course and then sent to the most aggressive country on the planet, Yatakang—approximately our current Indonesia. There a ruthless dictator has announced that a genius among his people, Sugaiguntung, has perfected a means of altering the germ plasm so that every child can be a superman, as proved by his remarkable work with apes. David is to get the truth about this secret, if it is more than a propaganda trick. And in Yatakang, he succeeds in meeting the scientist, seemingly finds the secret is a hoax, and prepares to rescue Sugaiguntung from his Dictator's domination.

(Please turn to page 153)

THE MISSPELLED MAGICIAN

DAVID GERROLD
and
LARRY NIVEN



If gods cannot behave like men,
let men learn how to be gods!

I

I WAS awakened by Pilg the Crier pounding excitedly on the wall of my nest and crying, "Lant! Lant! It's happened! Come quickly!"

I stuck my head out. "What's happened?"

"The disaster! The disaster!" Pilg was jumping up and down in excitement. "I told you it would happen."

I pulled my head in and dressed. Pilg's joy was a frightening thing. I felt my fur rising, fluffing out in fear as I wondered . . .

Pilg the Crier had been predicting disaster for weeks as was his habit. He predicted his disasters twice a year, at the times of the equinox. The fact that we were leaving the influence of one sun and entering that of the other would make the local spells completely unstable. As we approached conjunction—the time when the blue sun would cross the face of the red—Pilg had increased the intensity of his warnings. This was disaster weather; something dire would certainly happen.

Usually, it did, of course. Afterward—and after we of the village had somehow picked up the pieces—Pilg would shake his heavy head and moan, "Wait until next year. Wait. It'll be even worse."

Sometimes we joked about it, predicting the end of the world if Pilg's "next year" ever arrived.

I lowered the ladder and joined Pilg on the ground. "What's the trouble?"

"Oh, I warned you, Lant. I warned you. Now maybe you'll believe me. I warned you, though—you can't say I didn't warn you. The omens were there, written across the sky. What more proof did you need?"

He meant the moons. They were starting to pile up on one side of the sky. Shoogar the magician had predicted that we were due for a time of total darkness soon—perhaps even tonight—and Pilg had seized on this as just one more omen of disaster.

As we hurried through the village I tried to get Pilg to tell me what had happened. Had the river changed its course? Had someone's nest fallen from its tree? Had the flocks all died mysteriously? But Pilg was so excited at having finally been proven correct that he himself was not sure exactly what had happened.

One of the hill shepherds, it seemed, had come running into town, panic-stricken and shouting something about a new magician. But by the time I got this information out of Pilg we were already at the village clearing where the frightened shepherd was leaning against one of the great house-trees, gasping out his story to a nervous group of men. They pressed in close to him, badgering

him with questions. Even the women had paused in their work and, hanging back at a respectful distance, listened fearfully to the shepherds words.

"A new magician," he gasped. "A red one—I saw him." Someone handed him a skin. He sucked the quaff from it noisily, then panted, "Near the cairn of the wind-god. He was throwing red fire across the mountains."

"Red fire. Red fire."

The villagemen murmured excitedly among themselves, each offering his neighbor his own views on what this startling situation must mean.

"If he throws red fire, he must be a red magician."

Almost immediately I heard the word "duel." The women must have heard it too, for they gasped and shrank back from the milling group of men.

I pushed my way through to the center of the crowd.

"Ah, Lant," said one of the men. "Have you heard? There's going to be a duel."

"Is there?" I demanded. "Have you seen the runes of the duel inscribed across Shoogar's nest?"

"No, but—"

"Then how do you know there's going to be a duel?"

"A red magician—" gasped the shepherd. "A red magician—"

"Nonsense. No red magician could have the powers you describe. Why don't you wait until you know something definite before you start spreading silly rumors that frighten women and children?"

"You know Shoogar as well as we. As soon as he discovers there is a new magician in the district, he'll—"

"You mean Shoogar doesn't know yet?"

The man looked blank.

I raised my voice. "Has anyone thought to tell Shoogar?"

Silence. No one had. Or perhaps someone had and had not yet returned to tell of Shoogar's reaction. In any case, my duty was clear. I must prevent Shoogar from doing something rash. I hurried through the trees toward the magician's nest.

SHOOGAR'S nest was of a form well suited for a wizard. It was a squat, misshapen gourd hung from a forbidding black ogre of a tree and well beyond the limits of the village. The Guild of Advisors was afraid to let him move closer—he was always experimenting with new spells.

I found Shoogar already packing his travel kit. His agitated manner told me he was worried. Then I caught a glimpse of what he was packing and I was worried. The last time he had used that ornate bone-carved *tarinele* was when he had hurled the curse of the itching red boils at Hamel The Failure.

I saw what he was packing in on top of the *tarinele* and I flinched.

"I believe that's against the Guild Rules," I said.

For a moment I thought he'd hurl a spell at me. I cringed and instinctively made a spell-cutting gesture, forgetting for the moment that Shoogar himself had made the protective amulets I wore. He couldn't possibly break through his own protections, at least not for a few more days. They would expire with the coming of the blue dawns.

"You," he snapped. "What do you know of magic? You who call yourself my friend. You didn't even have the courtesy to inform me of this intruding sorcerer."

"I didn't even know of him myself until just a few moments ago. Perhaps he only arrived today."

"Arrived today? And immediately began throwing red fire about? Without first informing himself of the local gods, tidal patterns, previous local spells and their side effects? Ridiculous! Lant, you are a fool. You are an idiot of the first circle where magic is concerned. Why do you bother me?"

"Because you are an idiot where diplomacy is concerned," I snapped back, my fur bristling. I am one of the few people in the village who can bristle at Shoogar and survive to tell about it. "If I let you go charging up the mountain every time you felt you had been wronged you'd be fighting duels as often as the blue sun rises."

Shoogar looked at me and I could tell from his expression that my remarks had sunk home. "Smooth your fur, Lant. I did not mean that you were a complete fool. I just meant that you are not a magician."

"I'm glad you are aware of my skill as a diplomat," I said and allowed myself to relax. "Our abilities must complement each other, Shoogar. If we are to succeed in our endeavors we must maintain a healthy respect for each other's powers. Only thus can we protect our village."

"You and your damned speeches," he muttered. "Some day I'm going to make your tongue swell up to the size of a sour melon just for the sake of some peace and quiet."

I ignored that remark. Considering the circumstances, Shoogar had a right to be testy. He closed up his travel kit, tugging angrily at the straps.

"Are you ready?" I asked. "I'll send a message up to Orbur, telling him to ready two bicycles immediately."

"Presumptuous of you," Shoogar muttered.

But I knew that he was secretly greatful for the thought. Willville and Orbur, my eldest two sons, carved the best bicycles in the district.

HE FOUND the new magician right where the shepherd had said, near the cairn of Musk-Watz, the wind-god. Across a steep canyon from the cairn is a wide grass-covered mesa with a gentle slope to the south. The new magician had appropriated this and scattered it with his devices and oddments. We pulled our bicycles to a shuddering halt. He was in the process of casting a spell with an unfamiliar artifact. Shoogar and I paused at a respectful distance and watched.

The stranger was slightly taller than I, considerably taller than Shoogar. His skin was lighter than ours and hairless but for a single patch of black fur, oddly positioned on the top half of his skull. He also wore a strange set of appurtenances balanced across his nose. It appeared that they were lenses of quartz mounted in a bone frame through which the stranger could see.

The set of his features was odd and disquieting, and his bones seemed strangely proportioned. Certainly no normal being would have a paunch that large. The sight of him made me feel queasy and I surmised that perhaps some of his ancestors had not been human.

Magicians traditionally wear outlandish clothing to identify themselves as magicians, but even Shoogar was unprepared for the cut of this stranger's costume. A single garment covered most of his body. The cloth appeared to be woven into a shape which almost exactly matched his own. There were high flared cuffs on the pantaloons to allow for his calf-high boots and over his heart was a golden badge. Its design appeared to be based on the shape of the egg, which I guessed must be his personal symbol. Around his middle he wore a wide belt, to which were attached two or three small spell devices.

He had also set up a number of larger devices, two hands of devices to be exact—I counted. Most of them had the blue-white glimmer of polished metal. (There is little metal in our village—it rusts quickly—but I am a man of the world and have traveled much. I am familiar with the sight of metal, having seen it in the highlands, but nothing so finely worked as this.)

These devices stood on three legs so that they were always level, even where the ground was not. As we watched, the stranger peered into one of them, peered across the canyon at the sacred cairn of Musk-Watz, the god of the winds, and peered into his device again. Muttering constantly to himself, he moved across the clearing and adjusted another of his spell devices. Evidently this was a long and complicated spell, though just what its purpose was neither Shoogar nor I could fathom.

Occasionally he would refer to a large, egg-shaped nest, black and regular of contour, sitting on its wide end off to one side of the pasture. As there were no trees in the area large enough to hang it from, he had set it on the ground. An unwise course, to be sure, but the shell of that nest looked like nothing I had ever seen—perhaps it was able to resist marauding predators. He had no animals that I could see and I wondered how he had moved it here—or else how he had built it overnight. If he had done either, his power must be formidable.

The stranger did not notice us at all and Shoogar was fidgeting with impatience. Just as Shoogar was about to interrupt him the stranger straightened and touched his device. The device responded by hurling red fire across the canyon—directly at the cairn of Musk-Watz.

I thought Shoogar would suffer a death-rage right then and there. The weather gods are hard enough to control at best and Shoogar had spent three long lunar configurations, trying to appease Musk-Watz in an effort to forestall another season of hurricanes. Now the stranger had disrupted one of his most careful spells.

UNBELIEVABLY red, eye-searing bright and narrow, straight as the horizon of the ocean (which I have also seen), that crimson fire lashed out across the canyon, striking Shoogar's carefully constructed outcrop. I feared it would never end—the fire seemed to go on and on.

And the sound of it was dreadful. A painful, high-pitched humming seemed to seize my very soul. A piercing, unearthly whine. Under this we could hear the steady crackling and spattering of the cairn.

Acrid smoke billowed upward from it and I shuddered, thinking how the dissipating dust would affect the atmosphere. Who knew what effects it would have on Shoogar's weather-making spells? I made a mental note to have the wives reinforce the flooring of our nest.

Suddenly, just as abruptly as it had begun, the red fire went out. Once more the silence and the calm descended over the mesa. Once more the blue twilight colored the land. But across my eyes was a brilliant blue-white afterimage. And the cairn of the wind-god still crackled angrily.

Amazingly enough, the cairn still stood. It smoldered and sputtered and an ugly scar showed where the red fire had touched it—but it was still intact. When Shoogar builds, he builds well.

The stranger was already readjusting his devices, muttering continuously to himself. I wondered if that were part of the spell. Like a mother vole checking her cubs he moved from device to device, peer-

ing into one, resetting another, doing strange things to a third.

I cast a glance at Shoogar. I could see a careful tightening at the corners of his mouth. Indeed, even his beard seemed clenched. I feared that a duel would start before the stranger could offer Shoogar a gift. Something had to be done to prevent Shoogar from a rash and possibly regrettable action.

I stepped forward boldly.

"Ahem," I began. "Ahem. I hate to interrupt you while you are so obviously busy—but that bluff is sacred to Musk-Watz. It took many cycles to construct the pattern of spells which—"

The magician looked up and seemed to notice us for the first time. He became strangely agitated and muttered words in a language neither Shoogar nor I had ever heard before. I must confess I was uneasy. It might be a secret tongue even more powerful than the Guild of Sorcerer's tongue. It might even be the language of . . .

The magician took a quick step toward us. He made a straight-armed gesture, palms open to us, and spoke in quick tense words. I threw myself flat on the ground, arms over my head.

Nothing happened.

When I looked up Shoogar was still beside the other bicycle, his arms outstretched in a spell-breaking pattern. Either the stranger's spell had miscarried or Shoogar had blocked it. The stranger threw no more spells. Instead he backed toward his oddly shaped nest, never taking his eyes from us. He continued his strange words but now they were slow and low pitched, like the tone one uses to calm an uneasy animal. He disappeared into his nest and all was quiet and blue.

Except for the crackle of cooling rock which still reached across the canyon to remind us that Musk-Watz had been defiled.

II

I TURNED to Shoogar. "This could be serious."

"Lant, you are a fool. This is already serious."

"Can you handle this new magician?"

Shoogar grunted noncommittally and I was afraid. Shoogar was good. If he were not sure of his skill here the whole village might be in danger.

I started to voice my fears but the stranger abruptly reappeared, carrying another of his metal-and-bone devices. This one was smaller than the rest and had slender rods sticking out on all sides. I did not like its looks. It reminded me of some of the more unpleasant devices that I had seen during the dark years.

The magician watched us all the time he was setting it up on its

three slender legs. As he turned it to face us I tensed.

It began to make a humming noise like the sound of a water harp when a string bow is drawn across its glass tubes. The humming rose in pitch until it began to sound disturbingly like that of the device of the red fire. I began gauging the distance between myself and a nearby boulder.

The stranger spoke impatiently to us in his unknown tongue.

"You are discourteous," rumbled Shoogar. "This business can wait, surely?"

The spell device said, "Surely?"

I landed behind the boulder. Shoogar stood his ground.

"Surely," he repeated firmly, "you violate custom. In this, my district, you must gift me with one new spell, one I have never seen. Were I in your district—"

The spell device spoke again. Its intonation was terrifying and inhuman.

"New spell gift—never known—surely."

I realized that the stranger had spoken first. His device was attempting to speak for him in our words. Shoogar saw it, too, and was reassured. The device was only a speakerspell and a poor one at that, despite its powerful shape.

Shoogar and the speakerspell and the stranger stood on that wind-swept mesa and talked with each other. Or rather, they talked at each other. It was infant's talk, most of it. The thing had no words of its own. It could only use Shoogar's—sometimes correctly, more often not.

Shoogar's temper was not improving. He had come to demand gift or duel from an intruding warlock only to find himself teaching a simpleminded construct to talk. The stranger seemed to be enjoying himself, unfortunately at Shoogar's expense.

The red sun was long gone, the blue was near the horizon and all the world was red-black shadow. The blue sun settled behind a clump of deep violet clouds. Suddenly it was gone, like a taper blown out by the wind. The moons emerged against the night, now in the configuration of the striped lizard.

During certain configurations Shoogar's power is higher than during others. I wondered if he were master or servant to the striped lizard. He was just drawing his robes imperiously about his squat and stubby form. Master, apparently, from his manner.

ABRUPTLY the stranger repeated his palms-out gesture, turned and went back to his nest. He did not go inside. Instead he briefly touched the rim of the doorway and there was light. Garish light. It spurted from the flank of the nest, bright as double daylight.

And such a strange light. The

ground and the plants seemed to take the wrong colors and there was something not right with their shadows, an odd blackness of shade.

The new magician's motive was obvious even to me—and even more so to Shoogar. He leaped back out of the light, his arms raised for defense. But it was no use. The light followed him, swept over him and dazzled him, effectively canceling out the strength of the lunar light. The stranger had effectively negated the power of the striped lizard. Shoogar stood trembling, a tiny figure pinned in that dazzling odd-colored glow.

Then, for no apparent reason, the stranger caused the light to vanish.

"I think that the light disturbs you," said the speakerspell, talking for the magician. "But no matter. We can talk as well in the dark."

I breathed more easily but did not completely relax. This stranger had shown how easily he could cancel the effect of any lunar configuration. Any powers Shoogar might have hoped to draw from the sky would have to be foregone.

I watched the striped lizard slink dejectedly into the west. The moons rode their line across the sky, milk-white crescents with thick red fringes. On successive nights the red borderlines would narrow as the suns set closer and closer together. Then there would be no colored borders. Later, blue borders would show after second sunset—and Shoogar could make no use of any of this.

Shoogar and the new magician were still talking. By now the speakerspell had learned enough words for the two to discuss intelligently the matters of magicians.

"The ethics of the situation are obvious," Shoogar was saying. "You are practicing magic in my district. For this you must pay. More precisely, you owe me a secret."

"A secret?" echoed the speakerspell device.

Still cold and cramped, I was suddenly no longer sleepy. I cocked an ear to hear better.

"Some bit of magic that I do not already know," Shoogar amplified. "What, for instance, is the secret of your light like double daylight?"

". . . potential difference . . . hot metal within an inert . . . doubt you would understand . . . heat is caused by a flow of . . . tiny packets of lightning . . ."

"Your words do not make sense. I take no meaning from them. You must tell me a secret that I can understand and use. I see that your magic is powerful. Perhaps you know of a way to predict the tides?"

"No, of course I can't tell you how to predict the tides. You've got eleven moons and two primary suns tugging your oceans in all di-

rections. Tugging at each other, too. It would take years to compute a tidal pattern."

"Surely you must know things that I do not," said Shoogar. "Just as I know secrets that you are unaware of."

"Of course. But I'm trying to think what would help you the most. It's a wonder you've gotten as far as you have. Bicycles even—"

"Those are good bicycles," I protested. "I ought to know. Two of my sons built them."

"But bicycles—" He moved closer eagerly. I tensed—but he only wanted to examine them. "Hardwood frames, leather thongs instead of chains, sewn fur pelts for tires. They're marvelous. Absolutely marvelous. Primitive and hand-made, with big flat wheels and no spokes. But it doesn't matter—they're still bicycles. And when all the odds were against your developing any form of—at all!"

"What are you talking about?" Shoogar demanded. I was silent, seething at the insult to Willville and Orbur's bicycles. Primitive, indeed!

". . . starts with the perception of order," said the magician. "But your world has no order to it at all. You're in an opaque dust cloud, so you cannot see any of the fixed-lights-in-the-sky. Your sky is a random set of moons picked up from the worldlet belt . . . three-body configuration makes capture easy . . . tides that go every which way under the influence of all those moons . . . moons that cross and recross at random, changing their . . . because of mutual . . ." The speaker-spell was missing half of the stranger's words, making the rest gibberish. "And then the high level of . . . from the blue sun would give you a new species every week or so. No order in your observable . . . probably use strict cut-and-try methods of building. No assembly-line engineering techniques because you wouldn't normally expect an assembly belt to produce the same item twice in a row . . . but it's a human instinct to try to control nature. You must tell me—"

Shoogar interrupted the babbling stranger. "First you must tell me. Tell me some new thing that you may satisfy the Guild law. What is the secret of your red flame?"

"Oh, I couldn't give you a secret like that."

Shoogar began to fume again but he only said, "And why couldn't you?"

"For one thing, you couldn't understand it. You wouldn't be able to work it."

Shoogar drew himself up to his full height and stared up at the stranger.

"Are you telling me that I am not even a magician of the second

circle? Any magician worth his bones is able to make fire and throw it."

And with that Shoogar produced a ball of fire from his sleeve and casually hurled it across the clearing.

I could see that the stranger was startled. He had not expected that. The ball of fire lay sputtering on the ground, then died away, leaving only the burned core. The stranger took two steps toward it, as if to examine it, then turned back to Shoogar.

"Very impressive," he said. "But still—"

Shoogar said, "You see, I can throw fire also. And I can control the color of the flame. What I want to know is how to throw it in a straight line—as you do."

"It is a wholly different principle . . . coherent light . . . tight beam . . . small clumps of energy . . . vibration of . . ."

As if to demonstrate, he touched his spell device again and once more the red fire lashed out. Eye-searing flame played across Musk-Watz's cairn. Another smoking hole. I winced.

The stranger said, "It boils the rock and tells me what it is made of by telling me what color the smoke is."

I tried to conceal my reaction. Any idiot could have told him the smoke was bluish-gray, let alone what rocks are made of. I could tell him myself.

He was still talking. "Absorption of light—but I couldn't teach you how to use it. You might use it as a weapon."

"Might use it as a weapon?" Shoogar exclaimed. "What other use is there for a spell to throw red fire?"

"I just explained that," the stranger said impatiently. "I could explain again but for what purpose? It's much too complex for you to understand."

That was a needless insult. Shoogar may be only a magician of the second cirlce but that does not mean that he is inferior. In actuality, there are few secrets he is not privy to. Besides, gaining the first circle is a matter of politics as well as skill and Shoogar has never been known as a diplomat.

I could see that Shoogar was fuming.

IT WAS high time for the oil of diplomacy to be applied to the rough edges of these two magicians. I knew it was my duty to prevent friction between them, especially now that the barrier of language had been removed.

"Shoogar," I said, "let me speak. I am the diplomat."

Without waiting for his assent, I approached the speakerspell, albeit somewhat nervously.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is *Lant-la-lee-lay-lie-ah-no*. Perhaps it may strike you as a bit presumptuous that I claim sev-

en syllables, but I am a person of no mean importance in our village." I felt it necessary to establish my rank from the very beginning, and my right to speak for the village.

The stranger looked at me and said, "I am pleased to meet you. My name is . . ." The speakerspell hesitated but I counted the syllables of the name. Three. I smiled to myself. Obviously, we were dealing with a very low status individual—and I realized something disquieting as well. Where did this magician come from that individuals of such low status controlled such mighty magic? I preferred not to think about that. Perhaps he hadn't given his full name. After all, I hadn't given him the secret side of mine.

The speakerspell abruptly translated the stranger's three-syllable name: *"As a color, shade of purple gray."*

"Very odd," said Shoogar, speaking low. "I have never known a magician to be named for a color."

"Perhaps that's not his name but an indication of which god he serves."

"Nonsense," Shoogar whispered back. "Then he would be either Something-the-Red or Something-the-Blue. But he isn't either."

"Perhaps he's both—that's why he's purple."

"Don't talk foolishness, Lant. It's impossible to serve two masters. Besides, he isn't all purple. He's *Purple the Gray*. And I've never heard of a gray magician."

I turned back to the stranger, "Is that your full name? How many syllables are in the secret side of it?"

He couldn't be offended—I was not asking for the name itself.

He said, "I have given you my full name. *As-a-shade-of-Purple-Gray."*

"You have no other? No secret name?"

"I am not sure I understand. That is my full name."

Shoogar and I exchanged a glance. The stranger was either incredibly foolish, or exceedingly cunning. Either he had betrayed his full name to us, thus delivering himself into Shoogar's power, or he was playing the fool in order to keep Shoogar from discovering his real name. Perhaps the name he had given was some kind of spell trap. It certainly wasn't a clue to his identity.

As- A- Shade- Of- Purple- Gray was speaking again. "Where did you come from?"

"From the village." I started to point down the mountain but covered the gesture quickly. No sense in telling this stranger where the village was located.

"But, I saw no village from the air."

"From the air?" Shoogar asked.

"Yes, when I flew over the area."

Shoogar's ears perked up. "Flew?" You have a flying spell? How do you do it? I have not yet been able to get anything larger than a melon to fly—and I have been trapping the bubbles of noxious odor as they rise from the swamps."

Indeed, Shoogar had been trying to perfect a flying spell for as long as he had been a magician. He had even contrived to get two of my sons to aid him, Willville and Orbur. Often they would neglect their bicycle carving to work on some strange new device for him. So great was their enthusiasm for Shoogar's project that they had been accepting no payment at all for their labors—much to my annoyance.

The new magician smiled at Shoogar's description of his flying spell.

"Primitive," he said, "but it could work. My own vehicle uses somewhat more complex and efficient principles."

He pointed at his huge black nest. No, he must have meant one of the devices in it or near it. Who could conceive of a flying nest? A nest is a home, a fixed place, a locality of refuge, a place of returning. Philosophically a nest cannot so much as move, let alone fly. What is philosophically impossible is impossible to magic. This law constrains even the gods.

"Well, show me how it works. Teach me your flying spell," Shoogar begged him excitedly.

The stranger shook his head. "I could not show that one to you either. It is beyond your understanding."

THIS was too much for Shoogar. All evening long this new magician had continued to insult him. Now he refused even to gift him with a secret. Shoogar began jumping up and down in exasperation. He pulled his *tarinele* from his travel kit and had actually begun to pack the blow chambers with cursing powder before I could calm him.

"Patience, Shoogar! Please!" I begged him. "Let us return to the village. Call for a meeting of the Guild of Advisors first! Don't challenge him to a duel until we have a chance to talk this thing out."

Shoogar muttered something under his breath. He muttered a whole bunch of somethings.

"I ought to use this *tarinele* on you. You know how I hate to waste a good curse."

But he emptied the blow chambers, wrapped it up again in its protective skins and returned it to his pack.

He stood and faced the new magician.

"We return to our village to confer. We will visit you again before the time of the blue dawns."

The stranger did not seem to hear the last.

"I will accompany you," he said. "I would like to see your village."

Shoogar can be clever when he puts his mind to it.

"Certainly you may accompany us," he said. "It would be inhospitable of us not to welcome you. But you cannot leave yourself so far from your nest. Tonight the moons are down and the red curses roam the land."

I wished Shoogar hadn't brought that up. I remembered how far we were from home. The stranger chose not to reply.

Shoogar spread his hands helplessly.

"If we had empty nests in the village, you would be welcome to use one—but as it is, with the time of total darkness approaching, I would not recommend straying too far from one's own nest."

"That's all right," said the stranger, "I'll just bring it with me."

"Huh?" said Shoogar. "How? We certainly are not going to help you. That is, neither of us has the strength to—"

As- A- Shade- Of- Purple- Gray seemed to laugh. I was becoming most tired of his laugh.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "You just lead the way and I'll follow."

Shoogar and I exchanged a glance. Obviously this dumpy-legged stranger would be unable to keep up with our bicycles—especially if he was going to try to bring his nest. We waited respectfully, however, while the magician collapsed his artifacts and devices. I was amazed to see how easily they folded up and how compactly they stored, and made a mental note to get closer to one of them if I could. I was curious to see how the bone was carved and how the metal was worked. Perhaps I could learn something from the construction of such devices. They were carved too precisely, too delicately for me to see much in the dim light.

I glanced involuntarily at the sky. We were fast approaching the time of total darkness. Only six of the moons were left in the sky. No wonder the night was fading. I certainly did not intend to tarry for this stranger.

WITHIN a remarkably short time the stranger had packed up all of his devices and stowed them within his nest. There was something about his manner that made me feel vaguely uneasy; a sureness of self that implied he knew what he was doing.

"All right," he said. "I'm ready."

He disappeared into his nest, shutting the door behind him. That was when my feeling of unease gave way to one of pure terror. *Purple-Gray's* whole nest began to hum like the speakerspell and the red-fire devices within it—but

louder. Suddenly it rose into the air and hung there at twice the height of a man.

I thought Shoogar would fall off his bicycle from astonishment. I was having trouble with my own hands and feet. Even when you are not trembling all over a bicycle is hard enough to control.

The ride back to the village was a nightmare. Shoogar was so unnerved he forgot to chant any of protective *canteles*—and we both kept looking back over our shoulders at that huge looming egg which came floating silently, dreadfully after us, throwing off light in all directions like some terrifying manifestation of Elcin the thunder god.

And it didn't help matters that every time I looked up another moon had set, plunging us ever closer to the time of total darkness. One of us was moaning. I wasn't sure whether it was Shoogar or me.

The bicycles clattered roughly down the mountain path and I was so concerned about getting safely back to my nest that I did not even think to urge Shoogar to be careful with my other machine. The way he kept looking back over his shoulder I was sure he would hit something and split a wheel. Fortunately he did not—I did not know if I would have even stopped to help him. Not with that big black egg chasing us, always perfectly and terrifyingly upright.

Somehow we made it down to the grasslands. Several of the women saw us coming—they were out in the fields gathering the night fungi—but when they saw that huge glowing nest looming along behind us, they turned and ran for the safety of the village. Shoogar and I did not even think to park our bicycles on the hill but rode them right down into the settlement. The women would have to clean the mud from the wheels

We reached the village none too soon. The last of the moons was just settling into the west. We paused, out of breath, in the center clearing. The great black nest floated ominously above us, lighting up the whole village with its odd aura. The great trees and the gourd-shaped nests hanging from their mighty branches took on strange and terrifying colors.

From out of the air the magician's voice boomed louder than any natural voice: ". . . no wonder I didn't see it from the air . . . houses are structured spheres, suspended from the limbs of tremendous trees . . . must be at least . . . Wait until . . . hears about this. Where should I park?"

"Anywhere," I gasped weakly. "Put it anywhere," and made an appropriate sweeping gesture. I looked around to see if we had any trees strong enough to hang such a nest from. There were none big enough that were not already occupied—but if this magician could

make his nest fly, then he could surely hang it from even a sapling.

But even this the stranger did not do. He landed it on the ground.

And not just on any ground. He swept through the village toward the river and brought it to land on the crest of the slope overlooking the frog-grading ponds. The ponds were dry now, drained for their ritual purification and reseeding spells, but I was appalled at such callous disregard for the property of the village. I winced as the magician's nest sank into the ooze with a slow squishy *phlooosh*.

III

I DID not sleep well at all. By the time the smoky rim of the red sun began to appear over the horizon, I was already up and about. After my cleansing and purification, I felt better but still haggard and drawn. The events of the night before had taken their toll.

A glance out was enough to confirm that the stranger was still in our midst. Pilg the Crier was already moving through the trees moaning of this new development. Disaster was all the more certain now that the strange magician had moved his nest into the village. Even from here I could see a curious crowd gathering around it—though still keeping a respectful distance.

And, the frog-monger, was wringing his hands and moaning over his frog-grading ponds. He would have to repurify them again after the stranger left—and if that were not soon he might miss the spawning season altogether.

Shoogar and I went out to watch him that first day. As soon as he saw us he straightened from his examination of a local herb and disappeared into his nest. He returned almost immediately with an object in his outstretched hand.

"A gift," he said. "A gift for Shoogar the magician."

Shoogar was caught by surprise. He had not expected the stranger to produce the required gift. Now he had fulfilled his obligation as a magician and had the legal right to remain in the district. By the same convention, Shoogar was bound to respect the rights of the new magician as well as his spells. Guild rules are quite specific.

Shoogar, as resident magician, had the seniority. The stranger could do nothing to interfere with Shoogar's practice or previous spells but, aside from that, he was free to do as he chose.

Shoogar examined his gift. It was small and light, easily held in one hand. One end had a glass lens mounted in it. The stranger demonstrated how it worked. When one pressed forward on the thing's sliding nerve, the glass lens made light.

It was a trivial thing. I could

sense that Shoogar was disappointed and insulted that the stranger had not given him something more spectacular. Shoogar had other ways to make cold light. But there was little he could say. It is extremely bad form to test a gift spell in the presence of the giver.

The only advantage to the gift was that its light was a bright narrow beam, not quite like the stranger's beam of red fire, and certainly not as intense—but it was a shape of light that we had not seen before.

Shoogar had had his heart set on the flying spell or the red fire device. Yet manners compelled him to accept the gift graciously. Moreover, he had to remain while the stranger tried to make conversation.

Conversation, did I say? More like a monologue of madness!

"I cannot understand why your world has life at all," *Purple-Gray* was saying. "Your evolution patterns don't seem right—yet who would have settled here? We certainly wouldn't. For one thing, the dust clouds hide you from space. For another, you don't really get yellow, dwarf sunlight." Much of it was like that—coherent sentences trailing off into strings of unrelated words. "Though I suppose the red and blue combine to give the same effect. The plants all look black because there's so little green light but the . . . in plants doesn't use the green anyway. So that's all right. It's these double shadows that would drive anyone insane."

SHOOGAR waited through this stream of gibberish with commendable patience. *Purple-Gray's* words about different colors seemed to hint at something very important and Shoogar wanted to know what it was.

"You speak of 'this world,' " he said. "May one assume that you know of other worlds?" I wondered if Shoogar were baiting the stranger.

"Oh, yes. My world—" He looked up, considered, then pointed into the empty sky. "My world is in that general direction—I think. Beyond the dust clouds."

"Dust clouds?" Shoogar peered up into the sky. I looked also. So did the crowd of onlookers. "Dust clouds?"

The sky was an empty blue. What was he talking about?

Shoogar looked at the other magician. "Do you mock me? I see nothing. No dust clouds. No other worlds. There is nothing in the sky."

"Oh, but there is," said *Purple-Gray*. "It's just too small for you to see."

Shoogar raised an eyebrow, threw me a look, turned back to the other magician. I could sense some of the onlookers trying to restrain their mirth. Some of the

lesser women were already giggling and had to be herded away.

"Too small?" repeated Shoogar. "Too small?"

His patience was growing thin. Shoogar has no temperament for children, fools or madmen.

"Oh, no—you misunderstand," said *Purple-Gray* quickly. "It's too small to see because it's so far away."

"Oh," said Shoogar slowly. *Purple-Gray* still had not explained the dust clouds—or the lack of them.

"Yes. In fact, it's so far away that if you tried to get there on say, a bicycle, it would take you many generations. You would grow old and die before you had covered a significant fraction of the journey."

"I see," said Shoogar. "Then how did you get here? By pedaling faster?"

Purple-Gray laughed. "Oh, no, no. Even that wouldn't help. I—" The speakerspell hesitated, then said, "Went around . . ."

The last sound was incomprehensible.

Shoogar shook his head in confusion. Several more of the women had to be led away. It was not good for them to see a grown man making a fool of himself, nor was it advisable that they witness Shoogar discomfited. Several of the men began muttering amongst themselves. Shoogar gestured for silence—he still had not given up.

"Went around?" he asked. "Went around what? The dust clouds?"

"Oh, no. I went through the dust clouds. I went around . . ."

Shoogar repeated this sentence slowly, to see if there were something in it he had missed. He looked at Purple and shook his head.

"Uh-uh," he said. "Uh-uh." That was all, just: "Uh-uh."

He turned and walked away, up the slope, shaking his head and turning the small light-making device over and over in his hands.

PURPLE-GRAY spent the next several days collecting small plants, pieces of larger plants, handfuls of mud and water and dirt. There were plenty of sprats and adults to watch him but he took little notice of them.

A floating, three-legged, clicking device followed him about with its legs folded, unnoticed and untended until he needed it. Each time he took a sample of something he would mount this device on its legs and point it at the site. It seemed a harmless enough testing device but Shoogar would grit his teeth every time it came floating by.

Shoogar went into seclusion then, determined to discover the secret of the stranger's light-making device. When I visited him for the purpose of checking his progress he glared angrily at me.

He muttered, "Curse that single-shadowed demon!"

"Perhaps it would help if you tried to find out which god the spell draws its power from."

Shoogar gave me another look, more scathing than the first.

"Do I tell you how to carve bone? Why do you tell me magic? Don't you think I know my own business? I have already tested this device for the presence of every god in the known pantheon and it responds to none."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "perhaps it is based on a different principle. Purple appears not to call on any gods at all. Could it be that—"

Then how does he work his devices?" Shoogar demanded. "By superstition?"

"I don't know—but perhaps he draws his power from some different source. Or perhaps—"

"Lant, you are a fool. Why do you continue to prattle on about things you do not know? If you are going to try to talk to a magician about magic you should at least try to talk intelligently."

"But that's why I'm asking—"

"Superstition, Lant, is harmless prattle that gets repeated so often that people start to believe it—and then it is no longer harmless. The belief of the people gives it power. Magic, on the other hand, involves a carefully constructed equation of symbols intended to control specialized forces or objects. Magic works whether one believes in it or not."

"I understand that," I said. "And I do not think that Purple operates by superstition."

"Nor do I," said Shoogar. "His powers are too great."

"But it does not appear that he operates by magic either."

"Are you suggesting that the stranger's devices are independent of the gods?"

Shoogar's look and tone made it clear that he felt he was talking to an imbecile.

I stiffened my tone. "Such a thing is not impossible. Williville once confessed to me that he has often test-ridden new bicycles without bothering to bless them first. One grows careless and forgets. But nothing evil has ever happened to him."

"Willville and Orbur are under my protection—remember?" said Shoogar. "In payment for helping to construct a flying spell."

"Yes, I remember—I had preferred that they take money."

Shoogar ignored me. "I am protecting both your sons as a matter of course, so Willville's occasional ride on an unblessed bicycle proves nothing. Besides, if everything else has been properly prepared, the bicycle blessing is superfluous."

"I still say that such a thing as a device independent of the gods might be possible."

Shoogar gave me a look.

"You seem sure of yourself."

"As a boy, I once used an unblessed fishing rod I had made."

"So?"

"So, I caught a fish."

Shoogar snorted. "It still proves nothing, Lant. If you had blessed that rod and washed your hook as you should have you might have caught ten times as many fish. All that you proved otherwise was that you had constructed a usable fishing rod. What you needed for that experiment was a valid control—an identical fishing pole that had been blessed and washed. Then you would have seen which one could catch the most fish."

"You talk as if you have done such an experiment."

"Not with fish, no. But with traps." My surprise must have shown, for he said, "As an apprentice, every new magician must prove to his own satisfaction, at least once, that there is truly great power in magic. One cannot be a magician if there is a seed of doubt in his mind. By allowing the apprentice to satisfy his curiosity, we generate faith in him. It is a simple experiment—one that anyone can construct for himself—a test that can be repeated as often as you choose. Each time the results are the same and can be verified."

"And what happens?"

"The traps with the blessed bait will catch twice as many rabbits."

"So? Maybe it was only because the bait is more attractive to the rabbits."

"Of course. I would expect you to put it into layman's terms," said Shoogar. "But that's exactly what it is supposed to do. The whole purpose of the spell is to make the bait more attractive. These traps are simple devices, Lant. A simple device may not always need magic—but when it is used the results are easily demonstrable. Now, how many parts were there to your fishing pole?"

"Three. Stick, line and hook."

"Right. There is little that can go wrong with it, but still the string can break or the bait can slip off or the hook may not catch. And this is only a simple device—a thing that does not have to be very precise. Think, Lant! What of the construction that has many moving parts? It has to have all of them in absolute working order before any of them will work. What of, say, the bicycle?"

I STARTED to answer but he cut me off. "Don't interrupt. The bicycle has many moving parts, the wheels, the pulleys, the steering bar, the pedals, the axles. All of these things must be precision carved and in delicate adjustment with each other or the device simply will not work. Now, theoretically, a perfect machine is possible. But in practice—well, when you get a machine that has to be that precise simply to function, that is when the effect of the magic becomes most important. If only

one part fails—one part—the whole machine is useless. The simple device does not need magic, so its effect is enhanced by the simplest of spells. But a complex device needs a more complex spell just to keep it working at all. There is just too much that can go wrong. Tell me, Lant, how many parts are there to a bicycle?"

I shrugged. "I have never counted. A good many, I would guess."

Shoogar nodded. "And how many parts does the stranger's flying nest have?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"More than a bicycle?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"Very perceptive of you, Lant. I feel sure that there must be at least a thousand different parts in that flying nest. From my own flying experiments, I can tell you that a flying spell is a very complex device indeed. *Purple-Gray's* nest must have many moving parts, all of them working together in precision. The smallest error and nothing happens. It's quite obvious to me that the more parts a machine has, the more opportunities it has to go wrong. Now, are you going to stand there and try to tell me that the stranger keeps all of those various parts working in absolute precision without the aid of any magic at all?"

I shook my head. Shoogar made a very convincing case. He had certainly given the whole matter much more thought than I had imagined. But, of course, that was his job as magician. It was reassuring to know that he was doing it so well.

I beamed proudly at him.

"Then the same thing must apply to all of his other devices, right?"

Shoogar nodded. "You are beginning to see the obvious, Lant."

"They must need so much magic that they must be reeking of spells, right?"

Shoogar nodded again.

"Then, you have already figured out the secret of the light device, Shoogar? It is so complex that it is obvious, right?"

"Wrong. It is so simple that it is a mystery."

"Huh?"

"The most I've been able to do is to take the device apart—but look at what that leaves me!" He waves his hand at a workbench. On it were only four pieces, the elements of the stranger's light. These consisted of a hollow shell, a crystal lens, a flat plate and an interior canister, roughly the same shape as the outer shell. Shoogar turned this flat bulging object over and over in his hands but he could not find an opening. It was hard and solid and we both puzzled over what it might contain. It resisted all our attempts to open it and Shoogar would not use force for fear of destroying the devices within.

"And you have been able to make no changes at all in its condition?" I prompted.

"Not exactly. I have made one change."

"And what is that?"

"The light. It has failed completely and will no longer glow."

"Oh."

Shoogar glumly fitted the pieces together again as I watched. He activated the sliding nerve. Nothing happened.

"I thought not," he muttered. "I had hoped the spell might restore itself if given a chance to rest —but apparently I was mistaken."

"Why don't you take it back to Purple?" I suggested.

Shoogar whirled on me. "What? Do you think I am not capable enough on my own to solve this problem?"

"No, Shoogar," I protested. "I am sure you are capable. I just thought that—well, perhaps Purple has done something to cancel the original spell that you can't know about. Perhaps he has insulted some god."

Shoogar considered this. "You could be right. You're sure you're not doubting my ability as a magician?"

He peered at me. Hastily I reassured him.

"Shoogar, I have no doubts about the level of your knowledge."

This seemed to placate him.

"Good. Then we can pay a visit to Purple and find out why the device doesn't work."

IV

WE FOUND Purple out in the west pasture, doing something with a set of his devices. I looked for—but did not see—the red-fire device. Apparently, he had not brought it with him. The devices he was using here in the meadow seemed to be harmless.

Purple was puttering contentedly, murmuring and humming busily to himself when Shoogar interrupted and handed him the device. Purple took it, fiddled with it several times, then opened it and examined the cylinder within. He noted that its surface had gone red.

"Well, of course it won't work. The battery is dead."

Shoogar went pale. "The battery? Why did you not tell me there was a living creature within this device? I did not even know what to feed it."

"No, no," said Purple with a laugh. "You don't understand."

"I understand all too well," said Shoogar. "You entrusted a living creature into my care without even telling me. And it is no wonder that it died—imprisoned in that tiny box without food or water! You have caused the death of a living being to be on my head and now I must offer up prayers for its soul."

Purple managed to check his laughter.

"Listen to me, Shoogar. Listen. A battery is not a living creature. It is a device, a thing that stores power."

"Oh," said Shoogar. "A latent spell." He smoothed his fur and said in a calmer tone. "Well, which god must I placate in order to restore its power to it?"

Again Purple laughed. "You still do not understand. Here, give it to me and I will do it for you." He reached for the device but Shoogar did not give it to him.

"Why will you not tell me how to restore it?" demanded Shoogar. "What good will the device be to me, if I must continually come to you when its power is exhausted? What kind of a magician would that make me look like? And furthermore, what happens after you leave—how will I restore it then? If I at least knew which gods—"

"No gods," said Purple. "No gods at all. Your gods are not able to restore this device's power. Here, give it to me, Shoogar. I will do it."

Shoogar jerked his hand back as if stung. "The gods not able to restore the device's power? Only you?"

"Relax, Shoogar," Purple said. "The device works without the gods. It doesn't need them."

Shoogar said slowly, carefully, "Do you mock me? No device works without the gods."

"This one does. So do the rest of my devices."

Shoogar gently stiffened his tone. "Purple, you are not making sense. It sounds as if you are denying the power of the gods. Such talk will cause Elcin to rain lightening down upon your head. I urge you to—"

"That would be true," Purple interrupted, "if there were an Elcin. Or any other god. You have over a thousand gods here—and I still have not numbered them all. Oh, these primitive superstitions, born out of the ignorant need to explain the inexplicable. I'm sorry, Shoogar—I can't explain it to you. You're as much its victim as its master."

Abruptly, he was silent.

"Is that all?" Shoogar asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," the other replied.

Shoogar looked thoughtfully at the device he still held in his hands.

"Purple," he began slowly and evenly—his voice showed great control. "Were it not for your devices I would think you either a fool or a blaspheming red magician. But the abilities of your devices are such that you can be neither foolish nor false. Therefore you must be something else." He paused, then said, "I want to know what that something is. In your conversations you continually refer to things that do not make sense but they hint at meaning. I am sure that you know things that

I do not. Your devices prove that. I wish to learn these secrets." He paused again—it was very hard for him to say what he said next. "Will you teach me?"

Shoogar's words startled me. I had never heard him so humble. His passion for the secrets of the stranger must have been all-consuming for him to abase himself like that.

PURPLE looked at Shoogar for a long moment.

"Yes," he said, almost to himself. "It is the only way—teach the local shamans, let them introduce the knowledge. All right. Look, Shoogar, you must first understand that the gods are not gods at all but manifestations of your belief."

Shoogar nodded. "That theory is not unfamiliar to me."

"Good," said Purple. "Perhaps you are not as primitive as I thought."

"This theory," continued Shoogar, "is one of the key theories upon which all of magic is based—that the gods will take the forms necessary to their functions and those functions are determined by—"

"No, no." Purple cut him off. "Listen. Your people do not understand how the moons make the tides, so you create N'veen, the god of tides and patron of mapmakers. You do not understand how the winds are created by great masses of hot air, so you create Musk-Watz, the god of winds. You do not understand the relationship between cause and effect, so you create Leeb, the god of magic."

Shoogar frowned but he nodded. He was trying very hard to follow this.

"I can understand how it happened, Shoogar," said Purple condescendingly. "It's no wonder you have so many gods—single god worship starts with a single sun. Here you have two suns and eleven moons. Your system is hidden away in a dust cloud—" He saw that Shoogar was frowning, and said quickly, "No, forget that last. It would only confuse you."

Shoogar nodded.

"Now, listen to this carefully. There is something more than these gods of yours, Shoogar, but you and your people have forgotten that you have created the gods yourselves, and you have come to believe that it is the other way around—that the gods have created you."

Shoogar flinched at this but he said nothing.

"I will try to teach you what I can. I will be glad to. The sooner you and your people are ready to lay aside your primitive superstitions and accept the one true—" here, the speakerspell hesitated again—"magic, the sooner will you inherit—the lights in the sky."

"Huh?" said Shoogar. "What

lights in the sky? Do you mean those faint non-substantial things that appear at random and rarely in the same place twice?"

Purple nodded, "You are not able to see them as I am—but some day, Shoogar, some day, your people will build their own flying spells and—"

"Yes, that's it," said Shoogar eagerly. "Show me the flying spell. What gods—"

"No gods, Shoogar. That what I have been trying to explain to you. The flying spell is not derived from the gods but from men. Men like myself."

Shoogar started to open his mouth to protest, but he swallowed mightily instead.

"Derived from men?"

Purple nodded.

"It must be a simpler spell than I imagined—you'll teach me?"

"I can't," Purple protested.

"Can't? You just said you would."

"No, no—I meant that I would teach you my—" the speakerspell seemed to be having some trouble with the word—"magic. But I can't teach you my flying spell."

Shoogar shook his head as if to clear it.

"Your flying spell is not magic then?"

"No, it isn't. It's—" again the device hesitated—"it's magic."

I COULD see that Shoogar's temper was shortening.

"Are you or are you not going to teach me how to fly?"

"Yes—but it is your people who will fly—"

"Then what good is it to me?"

"I mean your children and your grandchildren."

"I have no children."

"I did not mean it that way," Purple said. "I meant—your people's children and your grandchildren. The spell is so complex that it will take many years to learn and build."

"Then let us begin," prompted Shoogar impatiently.

"But we can't," Purple protested. "Not until you learn the basics of—magic."

"I already know the basics of magic. Teach me the flying spell."

"I can't. It's too difficult for you."

"Then why did you say you would if you wouldn't?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't. I said I couldn't."

That was when Shoogar got mad.

"May you have many ugly daughters," he began. "May the parasites from ten thousand mud-creatures infest your codpiece!" His voice rose to a fearful pitch. "May dry rot take your nesting tree! May you never receive a gift that pleases you! May the God of Thunder strike you in the kneecap!"

They were only words, nothing more, but coming from Shoogar

they were enough to pale even me, an innocent bystander. I wondered if my hair would fall out from witnessing such a display of anger.

Purple was unmoved—and I must credit him for his courage in the face of such fury.

"I have already told you, Shoogar, that I am not concerned with your magic. I am above such things."

Shoogar took another breath. "If you do not cease and desist, I will be forced to use this."

Shoogar produced from the folds of his robe, a doll. I knew from its odd proportions and colors that the doll had been carved to represent Purple.

Purple did not even quail as any normal man would have done. I knew then that he must be mad.

"Use it," he said. "Go ahead and use it. But don't interrupt me in my work. Your world-life-system-balance has developed in a fascinating direction. The animals have developed some of the most unusual fluids-secreted-for-the-control-of-bodily-functions that I have ever seen."

Purple bent back to his devices, did something to one of them, a stabbing gesture with a single forefinger, and a whole section of the west pasture erupted.

Shoogar covered his eyes in despair. Purple had just violated one of the finest pastures of the village —one of the favorite pastures of Rotn'bair, the god of sheep. Who knew what the mutton would taste like this winter?

Then, to add injury to insult, Purple began gathering fragments of the meadow and putting them into little containers. He was taking the droppings.

Was it possible for one man to violate so many of the basic laws of magic and still survive? The laws of magic are strict. Any fool can see them in operation every day. Even I am familiar with them. They operate the entire world and their workings are simple and obvious.

But Purple, this man of the flying nest, was blind even to the simplest of spells.

I was not surprised when Shoogar, grimly intent, set the doll down on the grass and set it afire. Neither was I surprised when the doll had burned itself into a pinch of white ash without Purple even bothering to notice.

Purple ignored it—and us. He showed not the slightest effect. Flaming sting things! What powers this magician must have! Shoogar stared at him aghast.

Purple's very casualness was the ultimate insult. When we left him he had one of his clicking boxes open and was fumbling inside. He never even noticed our going.

V

SHOOGAR was peering into the sky, a frown on his face.

Both suns were still high—broad red disc and blue-white point. The blue sun was poised on the edge of the red, ready to begin the long crawl across its face.

"Elcin's wrath!" he muttered. "I cannot use the suns—all is unstable. Damn the conjunction! That leaves me only the moons—and the moons are well into the mud-skunk." He hurled a fireball across the clearing. "An eight-mooned mud-skunk at that!" He put his hands on his hips and shouted into the sky, "Why me, Ouells? Why me? What have I done to offend you that you curse me with such unusable configurations? Have I not sworn my life to your service?"

There was no answer. I don't think Shoogar expected one. He turned back to his spell devices.

"All right then. If it is a mud-skunk you have given me, it is a mud-skunk I shall use. Here, Lant, hold this."

He thrust a large pack at me.

He continued to rummage through his equipment, all the while muttering under his breath. A fearful collection of cursing devices began to grow around him.

I indicated the pile.

"What is all this for?"

He appeared not to hear me, continued checking off items in his head, then began loading them into the pack.

"What is all this for?" I repeated.

Shoogar looked at me. "Lant, you are a fool. This," he said, and hefted his kit meaningfully, "is to show the stranger that one does not trifle with the gods of the full belly."

"I'm afraid to ask. What is it?"

"It's the spell of the— No, you'll just have to wait and see it in action, with the others." He strode purposefully toward the frog-grading ponds. I hurried after him. It was amazing how fast Shoogar's squat little legs could carry him.

An uneasy crowd of villagers was already standing on the rise above the flying nest—none dared approach it. When Shoogar appeared an excited murmur ran through the crowd. Word of Purple's insult had spread quickly. The villagers were tense with expectation.

Shoogar ignored them. He pushed through the milling throng and strode angrily to Purple's nest, ignoring the mud that splashed up and over his ankles and stained the hem of his robe.

He strode around the nest three times without pause, looking at it from all sides. I was unsure whether he had already started spelling or whether he was still sizing up the situation. For a long moment he stood looking at the landward side of that nest, like an artist contemplating a blank skin.

Abruptly he made up his mind. He stepped quickly forward and

with a piece of chalk inscribed the sign of the horned box on the side of Purple's nest.

An interested murmur of speculation rose from the crowd.

"The horned box—the horned box—"

This spell would be under the domain of Rotn'bair, the sheep god. Members of the crowd discussed it busily among themselves. Rotn'bair is neither very powerful nor very irritable—compared to Elcin, that is. Most of the Rotn'bairic spells deal with fertility and food-gathering. Few things will anger the sheep god—but if Rotn'bair could be angered, Shoogar would know how. The crowd murmured with an excited curiosity, each speculating on just what form the final spell would take.

Shoogar finished the sketch. Absent-mindedly wiping the chalk from his hands, he strode down to the mudbanks of the river. He paced back and forth along its edge, casting about for something. Abruptly he spotted what he was looking for, something just below the surface of the water. He grabbed quickly for it, his hands dipping into the river with no splash at all. When he straightened, the sleeves of his robe were dripping but I saw a brownish slug in his hands and after a moment I caught the odor of mud-skunk.

THE SCENT reached the rest of the crowd at the same time and a murmur of approval went up from them. The antipathy between Rotn'bair, the sheep god, and Nils'n, the god of the mud creatures, was known even to laymen. Evidently, Shoogar was constructing a spell that would play on the mutual antipathy of the two gods.

My guess was right—I pride myself on a fairly good understanding of the basic principles of magic. Shoogar slit the belly of the mud-skunk and deftly extracted its anger gland. Carefully he placed this into a bone bowl. I recognized the bowl, having carved and cleansed it for him myself. It was made from the skull of a newborn lamb and had been sanctified to Rotn'bair. Now he was defiling it with the most odious portion of the mud creature. No doubt, he now had Rotn'bair's attention.

He laid the bowl to one side and returned to the mud-skunk which lay writhing in a swampy pool. He picked it up and deftly sliced off its head without even offering up a prayer for its soul. Thus he defiled its death. Now he surely had Nils'n's attention.

Using the bladder of the slug as a mixing bag, he began to construct a potion of powdered ramsbone, extract of hunger, odor of sheepsblood and several other elements that I could not identify—but I suspected that all of them were designed to arouse the wrath of Nils'n although in what man-

ner was not yet completely clear.

Shoogar surveyed the nest of the mad magician on its riverward side. Then he began to paint his soupy potion in broad lines across its round black flank in a pattern of eleven stripes by eleven. Having finished, he sketched in the sign of the deformed changeling, the favored son of the sheep god. This was the half of the spell which would anger Nils'n. Shoogar had defiled a mud creature in order to celebrate the greatness of Rotn'bair. To complete the other half of the spell, Shoogar would now desecrate his earlier celebration of Rotn'bair, the horned box sketched on the other side of the nest.

He returned to the bone bowl, the one containing the anger gland of the mud-skunk. Using the legbone of a ram, he crushed the gland into a sick-smelling paste. This he mixed with ramsblood, defiled water and a greenish powder from his travel kit. I recognized that powder. It was an extract of fear, usually used where potent action is desired. It is derived from animals of the cloven hoof. Six sheep must have been sacrificed just to provide the small amount Shoogar was now mixing into his spell.

Stepping to the landward side of the nest and chanting a song of praise for Nils'n, Shoogar began painting a familiar symbol across the chalk sketch of the horned box. It was the sign of Nils'n, a diagonal slash with an empty circle on either side.

The crowd gasped appreciatively. Such originality in spellcasting was a delight to behold. No wonder he was called Shoogar the Tall. Rotn'bair would not allow such a desecration of his sheep. And Nils'n, the god of mud creatures, would not long be complacent while mud-skunks were being sacrificed to Rotn'bair.

The antipathy of the two gods is demonstrated every time the sheep are led to the river. Sheep are careless and clumsy and, as they mill about on the banks, they trample scores of frogs, snakes, salamanders, lizards, chameleons, and other amphibians that live in the mud. At the same time many of the more dangerous mud creatures, the poisonous ones, the ones with venom, lash back at the sheep, cutting their legs, ruining their wool, infecting them with parasites, giving them festering sores, leaving them bleeding from assorted cuts and slashes. The two gods hate each other and, in their various incarnations—the sheep and the mud creatures—they work to destroy each other at every opportunity.

Now Shoogar had inscribed insults to both upon the same nest. He had defiled creatures of each in order to celebrate the greatness of the other. If Purple did not make immediate amends, he

would have to suffer the wrath of both simultaneously.

Purple had said he did not believe in the gods. He denied their existence. He denied their powers. And he had stated that he was above Shoogar's magic.

I hoped he would return in time to see the spell take effect.

I followed Shoogar down to the river and helped him with his ritual purification. He had to cleanse himself of the odor of offense against the gods, lest he be caught up in his own curse. Sometimes the gods are nearsighted. We bathed him with six different oils before we even let him step into the river. No sense in offending Filfo-mar, the river god.

Even before we finished with the cleansing we could hear the curse beginning. We could hear the cheers of the crowd and under that was a dull sort of booming. Without even stopping to dry off, Shoogar wrapped his robe around himself and hurried back up the hill, with me trailing excitedly in his wake.

WE REACHED the crest of the hill in time to see an angry ram butting his head insistently against the side of Purple's nest. More rams were arriving and they, too, began to attack that looming black globe. The focus of their anger was the desecrated homage to Rotn'bair and the very substance of the Nils'n symbol seemed enough to anger them. The smell of the mud-skunk was potent enough to raise anyone's hackles.

Red-eyed and breathing heavily, the rams jostled and shoved and butted even at each other in their frenzy to attack that odious desecration on the side of Purple's nest. Each time they struck it that same dreadful booming echoed up and down the hill and each time a great cheer went up from the crowd. I expected at any moment to see one of the rams go crashing through the walls of that fearful nest but no—those walls were stronger than I had thought. Perhaps even as strong as metal.

The only effect I could see was that each time a ram struck it, it seemed to lift slightly out of the mud for a moment before sinking wetly back. The rams, in their bleating frenzy, continued to strike at that offensive spot, as if they themselves were the very incarnation of Rotn'bair's anger. Again and again they hurtled at that dull black surface.

Old Khart, the lead ram, had already shattered both of his horns (sacred items in themselves—I mourned the loss) and several of the other rams were also bleeding profusely. Their eyes were red with fury. Their nostrils flared wide. Their breath came in hot puffs of steam and the sounds of bleating and snorting filled the air with a madness born of wrath. The

steam rose from their sides and their hooves slashed wetly through the ground, churning the grass and mud into a meaningless soup.

Already some of the rams were having trouble with their footing and indeed, as we watched, one of the older ones slipped and slid through the mud. He crashed against two others and brought them both down with him. All three were caught under the frenzied, slashing hooves of the others.

The once white wool of the animals was now stained with washes of pink and darker spots of red. Most of the rams were bleeding about their horns and heads and many had gaping wounds where they had been gored by one another's frenzy.

Their angry snorts were punctuated with grunts of pain and by the dull thud and hollow boom that rolled up and down the slope each time they struck the side of Purple's nest. But the creatures had strength beyond all natural endurance and continued to clamber over one another, continued to butt at that offending spell.

Each time they struck it the nest rose up out of the ground and threatened to slide down the slope and into the river. But each time it would pause and then sag wetly back into its hollowed out cradle of mud. Several times it trapped slow-footed beasts under the curve of its wall. I felt a great surge of emotion within myself—any moment now Purple's great egg-shaped nest would be toppled onto its side.

Abruptly three of the rams hit the nest at the same time and it seemed to leap into the air. One more struck it at just the right instant and as it rose out of its hollow it just seemed to keep on moving. Suddenly it was sliding downslope with a great wet slosh. Angry rams scrambled after it, butting at it all the way down, churning the mud with their hooves and leaving a long angry scar through Ang's carefully terraced frog-grading pools. I shouted in triumph with the rest.

The great black globe slid into the river with a resounding thud and a splash. a loud cheer of delight and victory went up from the villagers. Only I was silent, for only I had noticed that the terrible nest was still upright, that it had not canted even a thumbnail's width. Had Shoogar noticed, too? His puzzled frown was a match for mine.

But the nest was in the river. The rams slid and skidded down the slope, destroying what was left of the frog pools in the process. Almost joyfully they leaped into the water, still butting at the nest.

Others milled around the banks, churning the mud. Mud-skunks and salamanders ran panic-stricken under their hooves and a new shade of red added itself to the

stains on the heaving flanks of the crazed rams. Crushed mud-skunk mingled with the blood of the sheep and the terrible smell reached us on the crest of the hill, along with the hysterical splashing and bleating. .

NOW the black nest was within Nils'n's reach. So far only Rotn'bair had had a chance to avenge his insult—now it was Nils'n's turn. The banks boiled with life as salamanders, lizards, crabs, venom-bearing snakes and other river creatures came swarming up out of the mud and darkness. They scrambled across the churning surface and attacked anything that moved, even each other, but more often the rams.

The rams continued to butt at the nest, oblivious to the mud creatures caught in their wool, hanging from their flanks, biting and slashing at their legs. Their once proud flanks, now torn and slashed, were stained with angry strokes of red and great washes of muddy brown river water. It was an awe-inspiring sight, sheep and mud-creatures together attacking that ominously unmoving nest.

The villagers stood on the flanks of the hill and cheered the frenzied activity below. One or two of the braver shepherds tried to work their way down the slope but the snapping claws of the mud crabs drove them quickly back up to the crest.

The rams were slowing down but they still continued to mill about Purple's nest, clambering over the occasional body of a fallen comrade, refusing to cease even in victory. The water was pink. Angry mud-skunks swarmed along both banks of the river. It was a heartening sight. The crowd continued to cheer wildly and began to chant a chorus of praise to Shoogar. Pilg the Crier was leading them.

Down below, their anger spent, some of the rams were climbing back up the hill, slipping and skidding in their own blood and falling back down the mudslicked surface. But for the most part nearly all the rams were able to climb out. Only two or three slipped beneath the water and failed to surface.

The mud creatures, too, were beginning to calm—and the shepherds once more dared to work their way carefully down the slopes to tend their wounded flock.

"A beautiful spell, Shoogar," I congratulated him, "Beautiful. And so powerful."

Indeed, as the churning foam of the river continued to subside, revealing the full extent of the devastation, several of the villagers even began to mutter that perhaps the spell had been a bit too powerful.

One of the members of the Guild of Advisors remarked

thoughtfully, "Look at all this destruction—this spell should be banned."

"Banned?" I confronted the man. "And leave us defenseless before strangers?"

"Well," he amended, "perhaps we should only keep Shoogar from using it on friends. We could still use it on strangers."

I nodded. I would accept that. Certainly a spell that wreaked this much havoc should be used with discretion.

Meanwhile, at least eleven of our sheep lay dead or dying in the churned mud of the slope, mud creatures feeding indiscriminately on their stilled or still heaving flanks. Some of the rams were trampled almost into the landscape. Others lay with their heads at oddly twisted angles, their necks broken from butting against Purple's nest. Three bodies lay below the water with their mouths open.

What remained of the flock would show countless mud-skunk bites upon their legs and flanks. Many of those bites would undoubtedly become festering sores and probably more of the rams would die later.

The vermin of the mud would be vicious for days to come. It would not be safe to bathe for a while and probably the sheep would not dare to return to the river for a long time. They would have to be led to the mountain streams to drink.

The frog-grading ponds had been completely obliterated and would have to be resculptured elsewhere. Ang stood moaning and wringing his hands as he surveyed his mud-churned slope.

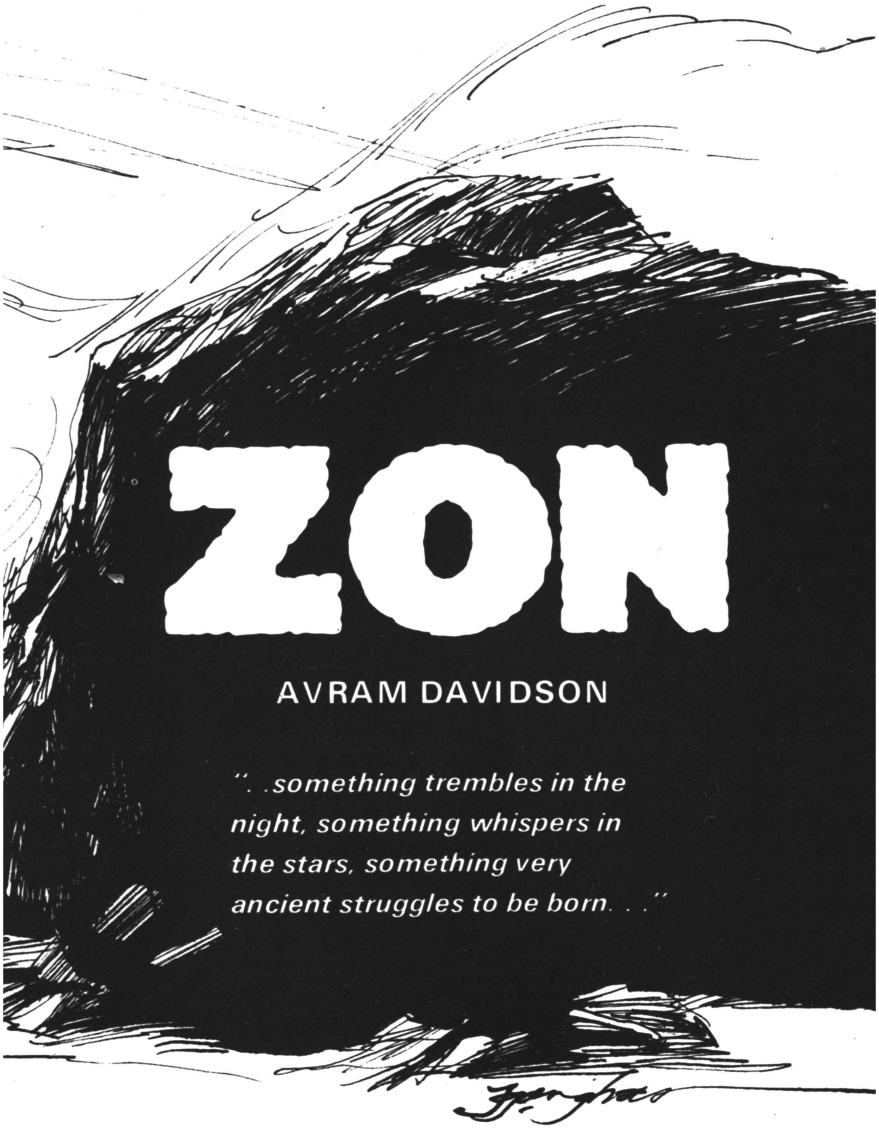
And finally, the wreck of the mad magician's nest now blocked the river. Dammed water spilled over the south bank in a torrent. Already it was carving a new course for itself.

And none of it mattered. These were all small prices to pay for the damage done to the stranger. Considering the magnitude of the task, it was one of Shoogar's less expensive efforts and we were proud of him.

Then why was the scene so utterly silent?

I looked to my left and saw Purple standing on the crest of the hill.

TO BE CONCLUDED


ZON
AVRAM DAVIDSON
". . .something trembles in the night, something whispers in the stars, something very ancient struggles to be born. . ."

I

WHEN the first thin snows of Winter were being scattered by the whips of the wind Thiobud, called Rooster, mounted on a rough but serviceable pony, made his way northeast across the iron-hard and frozen mud. He was heading for the well-guarded burroughs of the Scopus Valley, where, he had heard, there was an unmanned woman. And he hoped to make a parley about her. A thin pole rode in the leather lancesocket with a white strip of rag tied to its top, and his pockets were conspicuously turned inside out. All this was, of course, no proof that he had no weapons concealed on or about him but it did for ceremony. And if anyone did start any trouble and it turned out that Rooster had, say, a knife hid under his clothes, well, it would serve anybody right. A gaunt, big-mouthed dog loped along more or less beside him. It had already run down and ravened two snowhares so far today.

Rooster's eye-stone began to tingle on its thong against his skin. Someone not too far away was looking at him. He let his own eyes roam but didn't turn his head. Let them look. Even if he were to ride buff-bare they could none of them see inside his head. The dog lifted its horrid muzzle and growled and he growled back at it. They went on.

Two men in a turfy peered out of the peep-holes. Throwstones clinked in their pockets. At the first sound of the pony hooves they had crawled over to peep out, expectant little noises rising in throats and mouths. Now one of them began to swear.

"Chip-eating son of a lesbo Zon—"

"Huh? What? Whuh yuh mean?"

"A whiterag. Cow cunny!"

The other squinted through red cracked eyelids. The disappointment was like a sharp pain. He breathed hard.

He said, "Uh, whuh, we c' take m anyway, uh. Huh?"

"Look how cocky he rides, the cow cunny," muttered the first. "Elbows out—son of a Zon! Muss really think he is a somebody—Maybe is—" He turned a scornful look on his companion. "We c' take m, uh? We juss bonk m withs a bonk stone, easy 's bonking uh chickenbird, uh. *And* the dog. *And* the pony. Nen what? Naa naa. Someone like that muss have protection. So juss when we finish eatin' the pony, down they come, 'Kilt our bruth, didja?' Nex' thing ya know—well, ya *know*, doncha? Uh-uh. I don't want no sharpstick hammered up my sphinc. Nup."

Already the figures were dwindling. Too far away for a successful take. The second man sighed and slobbered a little.

"Besides," he said, "anybody with poke enough to go out whiteragging, uh, mays got uh witch

overlookin for m. Person c' fall apart, inch by inch, uh, uuhhh!" His filthy body shuddered in a convulsion not caused by the temperature but he made out it was, crawled away from the peephole. "Gunna throw uh-nuther chip on the red-eye," he muttered. "Gettin cunny cold in this cunny turfy."

Slowly, either from cold or reluctance, his bruth moved, too.

"Son of a Zon—see how cocky he sat on that Zon cunny ponny?"

They blew on the small dung fire and coughed in the bitter smoke. Then they spread out their tattered hands to warm.

WOLF HILL and the level circle which was Wolf Hill Pond. Strangers Pass. Buffalo Head. And then Three Rock Brook—nobody, nothing there now but a person didn't tarry without good reason. Bow Gaze, also called River Bow Gaze, and far down below the mist made by the smokes of the many burroughs. A rich and interesting country but not the country, not the burroughs for which Rooster was heading now. And would reach—if he didn't get pulled down by wild dogs or wild men or civil men who just might have what seemed to them good reasons for not respecting a white rag—if he weren't gored by a bull of some sort, crushed by a deadfall, didn't ride into a stakes-pit, get caught in a witch-lace.

Wolf Hill, Wolf Hill Pond, Strangers Pass, Buffalo Head, Three Rock Brook, River Bow Gaze. So far, so good. No landmarks missed. The next one should be Poison Bones Flat, a good place not to go barefoot and requiring a sharp eye and a wide circuit on behalf of the pony. And after that—

He dropped *after that* from the top of his mind and began to think about *right now*, as soon as he saw over the next big rise. The dog didn't so much growl as grunt. And the pony nickered. Rooster counted five other—no—six other ponies. He wasn't able to say just how many people but one of them was a child. That was a good sign—a child. So were the travoys. No one went out venturing (a smooth word for a rough scene), no one went out raiding with children or travoys. He didn't yet know if he wanted to company with them—or if they'd let him, for that matter—even if they were going his way. They wouldn't, couldn't go very fast. Still, never mind, it was time to rest a while, they'd built a fire and—who knows—he might learn something. There—they'd seen him. Some were standing up, pointing.

He raised both his arms and the pole. Not increasing his pace in the least he guided his mount with his knees down the other side of the rise.

It was the child whose voice split the cold and the silence with a tiny puff of breath.

"White rag," the child said. "A whiteragger!"

And, although the grown ones must have noted that by then, somehow the child's naming it seemed to make the fact certain. They did not, to be sure, unstring their bows but they lowered them, spoke sharply to their dogs. About twenty feet away the newcomer stopped. For a moment they looked at each other. The newcomer saw three men in red-dyed sheepskins, a woman mostly wrapped in an enormous mantle of dark wool, and the child, whose clothes had evidently been made out of the scraps of its elders' clothes. All were of dark skin and eyes, with here and there a lock of black hair hanging loose. And all were still unsatisfied. They saw a young man in leather, the hood of his jacket almost down to his eyes, naturally ruddy face nipped still ruddier by cold and wind.

The woman muttered into her mantle and one of the men said, "Dismount and make your dog bide there." The dog raised a leg against a hummock but showed no disposition to move closer after being bidden. "What do they call you?" the spokesman asked suspiciously.

"Call me Rooster—though I have a birth-name and a father's-name, too. Tell me, then, can I come up?"

A short hesitation.

"Come up."

THEY slipped their hands inside his clothes, found no weapons. Then they touched his hands with cold iron, to show if he were a witch; and with a silver ring, to see if he were a bloodsapper. And then, since he neither flinched nor cried out nor shrank back, they put a pinch of powdered sign-bark on his tongue and gave him water and watched his throat to be sure he swallowed. It was not savory, to be sure, but he had swallowed worse sign-powder in his life and thanked his witch (if he had one) that none of any of it had been poison—also a hazard of coming up to strangers.

"All clear, saltmaster?"

"All clear, Rooster. Sit by the fire."

"I will sit by the fire . . . Just a bit late for travoys, isn't it?" He inclined his head towards the wood-framed drag-alongs, cargoes lashed in place.

"The mud is all safe-frozen. Snow's not deep enough for sleds. We'll make our winter camp all right. Have a hunk of our salt. It's good—well made, clean. And the fire was welcome and he, feeling its heat on his face, pulled his hood back. "Rooster, uh? Well, I see why. Never saw a red cresty before." They all gaped—and the child jumped and set its hands to clapping so that the shell anklets rattled and clinked—at the sight of his head, polled to the skin, save for the roach or comb of red hair riding like a crest from brow to nape. And then the stocky saltmaster spoke a word or two in a low voice, and the staring stopped. "Yes, huh, good salt—uh—trading's been good, too, this season—huh—"

The bulky woman had secured her child and now swiveled slowly around to face the guest.

"Why you whiteragging?" she asked, in a soft, husky voice. "Hunting a loster? Doing a punish?"

The soft comb and curl of wavy red hair ruffled as he shook his head.

"I've got places to go— I don't want to stop for troubles— Scopus Valley is the next place I'm going to—"

The younger of the two other men looked at him, teeth showing in his lower jaw.

"Heading for Scopus? Don't want trouble? Why, that's a Zon burrough, Roosty, didn't you know that? That's the biggest Zon burrough there is in all round uh these parts. You won't gets through The Notch, thems women, thems Zons, ull kill y'. Thems'll cutcher dippus off—"

Rooster shrugged. The saltmaster shook his head.

"No, for the white rag. The rule. Zons keep to all the rule. Nobody keep to all the rule the way Zons do—"

And: "That's right, Cler—"

"True as salt, Cler—"

"Never mind trying to scares him, Cler—" the others said.

Except the saltmaster, who said, "Yes, Cler, maybe you be scare for yourself, uh? Suppose *we* muss go to Scopus before to winter camp? So, salt, we send *you* in first, Cler—"

Cler shook his head so vigorously that most of his lank black hair escaped from under his cap.

"Not me," he said, as the others laughed (not Rooster, though). "I aints a going even near any Zon burrough! Send her, send Bets—"

"You could carry the white rag, you know, Cler," another man said. "Never mind the pole—juss tie it onto your dippus, Cler—"

But Cler, it was clear, white rag or not, wasn't going.

When the laughter ebbed the stout saltmaster said, "Wells, now I don't know. 'Send Bets . . .' suppose Bets gets to like it there and don't come back?"

More laughter. And Bets gave her husband a hearty cuff and called him, "Dirty fat man—" said she was too old and, besides, had gotten into *other* bad habits.

"Seems pretty good habits to me," her husband said serenely. Then, more serious, "But we have heard, Roosty, that the old Zon Ladyking of Scopus burroughs—what be her name?—it's a story about that it's her death-time—or was—"

"What? Dead?"

Rooster's head snapped up. His eyes left the embers. He forgot the smell from the fat stone caldron sitting in their midst. He met the eyes of the saltmaster, who, with thumb and forefinger, was rubbing a fold of his wattled chin. It was not Rooster alone who was hoping to learn something from this encounter—the older man's black eyes were sharp and keen.

"Dead? I didn't say 'dead,' " this one corrected him. "Not long ago at all we'd hears a story it was her death-time. Mays be she's dead, mays be she'd gets better, all; maybe she's still the same. Perhap you'll learn the truth before we, for we only mays be going there, to Scopus-Zon . . . But you say you do go there—'the next place—' uh?"

Fire or not, it was cold—the wind rustled and whimpered in the dry snow and blew gusts of it against the guest's naked head. He pulled his hood over and used the excusable action to avoid his host's eyes. No tentpegs could drive into that frozen soil and, had it been the saltmakers' intention to erect one of their yurtlike portable huts, they would already have at least begun it. So—clearly, after eating, they would be moving on again. So—two questions. Where would they be moving? And would he want to move with them?

"Nothing special in the pot," the saltmaster murmured—Rooster felt the undiminished tingling of the eye-stone—"a something of everything. No feast. But good. You share our fire. So. Share our food."

A long moment passed, so long that Rooster, half wondering why he had not answered, became aware that no one was waiting for his answer; became totally aware that half his attention had for most of the long moment been on something else. The continual yip-yap of the dogs had ceased, the hobbled ponies had turned and lifted their heads, the clitter-clatter of the child's shells was silent, the wind itself had gone quite dead. And in the silence and out of the silence came a sound of hooves, not slow, not fast—deliberate. Not the hooves of a horse or a pony, familiar as the sound of human breath, nor the wild, shy hooves of deer, the dumpy ones of swine. Not elk or moose—heavier than bison. Did bison feet ever go at that pace? It was the combination of unfamiliar sound with familiar beat—it was that, yet it was something else. A scent, an odor, heavy and sharp, filtered through the still air. The muscles of the dogs moved but no limb stirred.

They had not been aware, intent in their fire-warmed hollow, of a gathering mist outside and around—and perhaps might not have become aware of it the very instant of their looking and straining towards the odd, approaching sound, its direction at last determined—had not at that moment the source of the sound itself appeared. Half-obscured in the mist, on the spine of the rise, crossing laterally upon it, a figure curiously caped and cowled in strange garments. A figure riding on a strange beast, a huge beast, with great head slung low and great horns outspread. A figure girt about with unfamiliar or at least certainly undistinguishable gear and objects.

The figure moved along in the mist, rider and mount—the two moved through the mist. And the mist moved with the two.

LONG, long, the Rooster sat by the dying fire. Or it seemed long. In point of fact it could not, he realized, have been, for the fire was fed stick by stick and chip by chip. The fire was empty, the stone pot was gone from it. No doubt the stout wife was about to dish out the food—it would be welcome. He stretched. By salt! How cold and stiff he was.

With a laugh that caught in his chest he said as he turned to his hosts, "I feel as though I had been under a—"

Under a spell . . .

The words hung unspoken in the brittle air. He did not speak them because there was no need for him to complete the utterance, no one to address it to. Twenty feet away his pony stood and looked at him in silence.

And they two—and the embers in the fire—were the only living things remaining there in the hollow at the bottom of the rise.

All the others were gone. His dog, too.

II

MORGAN kept making mention of the cold, the cold. The furnaces were heated red-hot, then white-hot, and two stout servers (where one had done before) danced up and down on the box-bellows, forcing blasts of hot air into the pipes. Sweat in runnels ran down their heavy faces and their heavy flesh jogged and jounced. Others, hurrying by, perspired, too—though not as much by far—in the unaccustomed heat. Usually, at this time of year, the passageways were tolerable enough with only very small fires.

Two guards, furs slung over their arms, limbs and bosoms bare, stopped another whom they knew.

"The king—"

"She has asked for fruit—let me go—" and she sped on by.

Natural body warmth from all those in the vast bedroom would have served to warm it—it was stifling. Anxiety was on every face—still, much as those already there desired to remain, a sense of fairness and the rule constrained them to depart after a while and let others take their place. The rich and glossy furniture, except for one table on each side of the low bed, had been stacked against the wall. No one knew when Morgan's hair had begun to gray, all knew that she dyed it—it framed on all sides in huge jetty folds the sunken face on the pillows. For moments now the face had been still. Someone on each side maintained a gentle finger on the pulse vein in each withered wrist. Some of those watching watched no longer steadily the sunken, unmoving face—instead, their eyes flickered constantly to the single finger so gently held to each wrist. The room was silent. The face grimaced. A single sigh filled the room.

"The hen—the hen—"

"Yes, Father Mother!"

"—the hen—the hen—"

"Yes, Father Mother!"

The cracked, strained voice mumbled, muttered, dribbled nonsense—it was all the same. She spoke. King Morgan spoke. Therefore she still lived.

"Witches—witches—witches—"

"Yes, Father Mother!"

Hands waved, gestured frantically. The witches—in their glistening blacks slashed with glistening scarlet—surged forward like a black-and-scarlet wave.

The wave ebbed.

"—the hen—the hen—"

"Yes, Father Mother!"

Here and there was weeping. Someone old enough to remember the Zon King when she was not yet Zon King but Morgan alone—young and vital, full of figure, having many lovers—so someone wept. Someone young enough never to have remembered Morgan as other than the source of strength and power and the rule, Morgan, King of the Scopus Zons, Father

Mother, sexless strong—so someone wept.

"—the hen—the hen—"

"Yes, Father Mother!"

For a moment the old voice gobbled. It fell silent. The fingers stayed on the wrists. Then the wrists tore away, the withered figure sat bolt up in the bed, tore at the prime and priceless furs, at the butterfly silks. The glossy hair fell like a curtain across the seamed and riven face, was torn aside by the clawlike hands.

"I cannot breathe! I cannot breathe! Fire—fire—I am on fire! You're boiling me alive—alive—"

And, indeed, the gray-pale face had gone dull-red. Hands gestured, waved frantically. Messengers sped from the room, fled down the corridors, signaled impassionedly to the sweating servers atop the huge bellows-boxes. The sudden appearance of the clamoring, gesticulating figures below served chiefly to throw them out of rhythm. They rolled their eyes, could hear nothing, understood nothing, misunderstood enough to think that this relay, as the others, was come to urge them to pump more swiftly. And so, leaving off the incessant jogging from leg to leg, one side to the other, the two monstrous figures, breasts sweating black against coarse dun robes, took firm hold of the support bars before them and began to jump up and down, alternately, to force more air and hence more heat—

—figures began to climb the spiderweb of ladders up to them—

—voices shouted to rake out the furnaces, to douse them down with water—

—shouting the loudest, about to risk the fearful heat to alert the stokers, was Captain Rack, hot, angry, disheveled—

—laying upon Rack's arm a hand so cool that it commanded instant attention was—

"Memissary! Madame Sir! Yes, what—"

RACK followed back and to the side and to, if not precisely greater silence, certainly to less clamor and noise, the Memissary from the Hodus burroughs—tall, serene, slender, this one, rumored to be in direct line for the kingship of her own Zons, the treble-row necklace of walrus ivory, insigne of her rank, heavy upon her white shoulders.

"Madame Sir, yes?"

"Captain, with or without the steam which your plan must produce, 'twill be hours before the chamber of the Morgan King can cool."

This was so obvious that Rack could at first but gape. Then she bowed. "What does the Memissary say to do, then?"

"Obtain a fitting litter and place the King upon it and remove her to a farther and a cooler place."

Again—obvious. Again—unthought of. Captain Rack placed

her hands upon her breasts, bowed twice and, mouth already open for further shouting, turned to run back.

But then She of Hodus once more placed her cool hand upon Rack's hot arm.

"To walk means safer speed at present. I shall accompany you. You will meanwhile be composing yourself."

One after the other the clear, crisp truths. Rack was, among captains, only one captain. Accompanied by the tall, imposing, hieratical figure of the Memissary, Rack saw all in that frenzied throng make way. And, as she composed herself, thus she began to think: it was the death-time of Morgan Father Mother, Zon King of Scopus; did she die today, tomorrow, a soonly death must come. Then what? However smooth the transference of power, things would change, would change for all things. Hence—would change for Captain Rack.

Nothing could prevent it.

She might advance. She might stay as she was. She might find herself descending into unsought obscurity. She might be informed (bland words for Exile) that, "The roster was to be reduced," handed presents, told to return to her natal burroughs. After twenty years! To be flung into the dung-pit of the world of men!

Or . . .

Rack had never been so close and for so long to the Memissary. Each step they took together, deliberate pace more arresting than the swiftest race, was a step up the stairs of prestige for Captain Rack. Not necessary to hint that they two had been lovers—best (by far) to give no such hint at all. Always, some would believe it. Might it be true, yet? Rack all but trembled. Common sense told her that official and urgent business only coupled them now and that, this business over, they might never—probably never—meet again. Still—it was not certain. One might dream, hope. And more—every Zon burrough had its "private people," its "friends," its "well-disposed" in every other Zon burrough. Rack was showing the She of Hodus that she could compose herself, was dependable. Surely, when it came time to take thought of such matters, She of Hodus could hardly fail to think of Captain Rack. What, after all, could be more natural than that such a high-groomed Zon would want at least one stalwart soldier-type for a close companion?

Indeed, so full was her mind of such thoughts that it was with a mental stumbling of surprise that Rack found the two of them at the chamber of Lady King Morgan, whose death-time had not yet passed. Still the Zon folk ascended and descended from all levels to have their last audience, still they would linger and still their code of

honor made them regularly give way for others—for others, were they new-fledged Grade One Initiates or stooped and aging retired Captains-at-arms—on the double, thus, they made way for Rack and the Hodus-Memissary. Fans now waved over King Morgan as she rolled restlessly on her bed, still muttering gibberish, each mutter still evoking its respectful chorus.

"—the cockerel—the cockerel—"

"Yes, Father Mother."

"—cockerel—cockerel—

"Yes, Father Mother."

"Yes, Father Mother."

"*Yes, Father Mother!*"

III

HIS birth-name was Thiobud—his father's-name, Phiniad. He remembered his natal burroughs little but that little distinctly—swarms of children crawling in and out of hidey-holes they must have been allowed (in contradiction to all the safety principles of the rule) to grub out for themselves, so small were they—noise by day and noise by night—often hunger. And then one day, riding on his father's shoulders in a place without walls and the roof so high he had no word for it—his earliest memory of the world outside.

Recollection of the Orth burrough began abruptly. Instead of curling up anywhere on a filthy floor one slept in a particular place on a clean skin spread on a pile of clean hay. It smelled sweet—the previous floor had not. Perhaps it was saying so to his father that brought from Phiniad, not given much to words, the comment: *By learning new things we learn old ones, too.* There were fewer children at Orth, far fewer. They dug no tunnels of their own. They were not suffered to stale or ease where they pleased like puppy dogs and were fairly frequently washed. More than this was not exacted of him at first. Later on he and several other children of an age were taken in one group and conducted around the main landmarks of the burrough—with the customary smack across the behind to fix each one the more firmly upon their minds—from the fishponds to the loomrooms (as the saying went). He thought that Orth was a very fine sort of burrough, indeed. And, indeed, he still thought so.

Not long after that Orth underwent its first siege during his stay there. A mixed rabble of turfies (as the homeless, the outlawed, the ragged wanderers were called, after the sod huts in which they lived for lack of burroughs) stuffed up the smoke holes in hopes of suffocating the inhabitants. Who, instead of suffering themselves to be quietly stifled, retreated to lower levels and thence to outside by exits unknown to the

turfies and caught the besiegers by surprise—and were themselves caught by surprise.

Seemingly forever over the upper land at an even space which did not vary between them by a handspan and at an even pace which hesitated not for fear and increased not for zeal and which was perhaps most terrifying of all (that relentless, steady step) came band after band of armed Zons. Their arrows began their murderous songs against the turfies while the archers were still well out of stones' throw. The longaxes finished the job. Only the turfy women were spared—that is, only those of the women who had wit or willingness to tear open their tatters and, by baring their breasts, reveal both their sex and their preference for capture over death.

Not all had been willing.

The Zons had not, of course, come for the purpose of assisting the Orth folk, just as they had not (this time, at any rate) come to attack them. They had not even been on one of their periodic campaigns against the turfies. Long later he had heard that this group of bands had joined with others, and then all of them with others yet—tales of an army of Zons marching westward into the horizon, of great battles somewhere afar off, of witchbirds (buzzards, some called them) covering the multitudes of dead—dead women who had fought more fiercely than men, preferring always the embrace of death to that of men, the caress of bloody black wings to the caress of men.

Always.

NOT long after that his father took him to what (he later realized) was in effect a Council of the Elders. He had already seen most of them here and there and one by one, white-haired and white-bearded men in soft white robes—not till then had he seen them all together. In part it was much as though he were visiting any other group of older people—they said he was a fine boy, laid their hands on his head and wished him well, asked him if he liked it there more than in his natal burrough, beamed and chuckled at his emphatic *Yes!* In other part, however, he was aware of a difference.

In the Council cell light filtered from the light-well through panes of translucent shell upon the Elders, some of them so old indeed that their very flesh seemed translucent. And their thin old hands seemed to rest upon his head far longer than usual. He was asked questions other old people never asked him—and some of them dealt with things which were, and some of them dealt with things which were not but might be. And what, he was asked, would he do in such and such an instance? Or under this or that circumstance?

Finally one of them handed him a strip of skin. "Can you read?" he asked.

"Yes, my Elder, I am able to read."

The boy flipped the skin strip over and quickly ran his fingers over the tiny bosses and almost at once a look of ludicrous outrage came over his face.

He cried out, "This is—this is wrong!"

Several of the old men chuckled. One laughed outright. A few smiled. One gazed at the boy intently and without change of expression. And one gazed off as though into infinite space, his head never ceasing its incessant nodding, as though in continous agreement.

The particular Elder who had given him the strip of skin asked, "Why is it wrong?"

"I don't know why—I know how. Listen, it says, *Thiobud the son of Panerad the son of Phiniad* —and so on. But it is my father who is Phiniad—"

And the old man said, "True enough—but this does not make the record wrong. It refers to Thiobud, who was your father's father and whose father was Panerad the son of an earlier Phiniad. But these things you will learn in time. In time you will learn more than all of us here together have yet learned."

The boy's face, showing surprise at first, then keen attention, was turned full upon the Elder, whose eyes now held his. His red hair seemed the sole spot of color in that underground chamber, all shadows and greys and dim whites. His youth was the sole source of freshness in the Council cell, among the old, old men and their collective weariness, the smell of dust and age and the ancient furnishings.

Demeran, Chief of the Elders (he died soon afterward), said, "No man's life can ever be altogether his own—but yours will and must be less your own than is usual. Prepare yourself for this. When you next see something you particularly desire and may have, deny yourself it. When you next are about to do something you particularly desire to do and may do, deny yourself the pleasure of doing it. Cultivate this habit by day and by night, for it will provide you with excellent training and habits of discipline and self-denial, excellent habits for all men —but most excellent for you."

Demeran said, "You have seen the turfies. Their freedom from the burrough rule and from the need to subordinate and to submit they have purchased at the price of thirst, nakedness, animality, outlawry, incessant hunger and early death."

Said Demeran, "You have seen the Zons. Wealth and military power they have obtained but they

have obtained it by the sacrifice of natural love and natural softness and by the carefully and artificially cultivated hatred of half of humankind."

And he said, "You have seen life in your natal burroughs, whither your father went during a time needed to resolve certain personal uncertainties—and you will have observed and remembered that where there is no constraint there is no cleanliness, where there is no cleanliness there is no order there is no amenity."

His thin old voice had grown stronger and all his fellow sages nodded at his words. There were many more words before he paused in sheer fatigue and sipped at a tiny mug of milk and water. The words seemed to hang in the air, heavy as thoughts—the shadows were gathering in the declining day and it seemed to Thiobud that the shadows were the old man's words and were heavy with heavy thoughts and that they were presently to gather around him.

In another moment he might have shuddered or shrunk away, perhaps even turned and fled—but that other moment never came. Someone lit a lamp and he became aware of the familiar evening (also afternoon, also morning)cramp of hunger in his belly. That the evening meal be postponed in Orth was as unthinkable as that any other essential and scheduled routine be postponed. Therefore the gathering must soon terminate—therefore he could endure waiting until it did. As sure enough soon it did. The old one still gathering his wool from infinite distance and nodding, nodding, nodding, said (as they bowed and were dismissed, father and son). "Be sure, Phiniad, he is one."

Over the stewbowls the harmless halfwit who was permitted to eat with the boys said to him, "Ha, they got you now."

Thiobud said, "What?"

"They got you now."

"What?"

The man-boy indicated the direction of the Council cell—then all thought of it left his face and he slyly stole someone's chunk of bread—something which he did so adroitly and with face subsequently so innocent and immobile that even the victim could not stay angry at him.

"What do you mean, they got me now?"

But the other merely dipped his crumb and crust into the stew and sucked and munched and gave no sign of either hearing the question or understanding it.

Eveningdole was good—it was food, good food and all boys had healthy appetites. They ate with good will, talked in good voice to each other, laughed, chattered, made plans for tomorrow, passed bowls for seconds to the table captain. And he—Thiobud did the

same. But all the time like a wreath revolving and showing the same vines and ferns and flowers, like a wreath revolving over the head of a seated bridewoman, so did words seem to revolve as though visible and seen, the same ones over and over again.

You will learn more than all of us together. Be sure, Phiniad, that he is one. They got you now.

Over and over, around and around. Again and again.

Why would he be learning more than all of the Elders together? He was one what? Who had got him?

The meal went on as before, all things went on as before, but he knew without knowing why that nothing was nor would ever be again quite as before. And, like a wreath upon horsehair threads, like a wreath at a wedding-feast, the endless chain of words revolved and revolved and slowly slowly spun around . . .

You will learn more than all of us Be sure that he is one They got you now You will learn more than all of us Be sure that he is one They got you now

Around and around and around.

IV

HE SAW the first of the white-limed boulders from a very far off. Scopus—or at least early sign of it. The sign signified, as all well knew, *Be exceedingly sure that you approach only on what we would consider appropriate business.* All through the whole of the next day he passed such rocks at regular intervals, passed as well fields and pastures, these outer ones all empty at this season of the year. The night he spent in a clean and empty house where, probably, herders lodged. It was spotless and held stacks of fuel but no food—he would scarcely have ventured to help himself to any in any case. A man coming unbidden into Zon country—and when was a man ever bidden to enter Zon country—had to be very careful indeed. He looked around to see if there were any reading-tapes but there were none, not even so much as an empty spindle set. Cautious, the Zons.

It was halfway through the next morning that he saw the first guardpost house, a small triangular structure. He had no doubt that there were ample burroughs beneath—perhaps, even from here, underground ways led all the way to the main settlement, supplied along the way with light and air through cunningly hidden shafts: indeed, rumor even endowed such ways with water in the form of diverted springs.

Two of the guards were already outside. Had they simply sharper eyes than he? Had the underground rooms served as echo chambers, giving warning of his pony's hooves? Or was there some Zon magic at work? Having no an-

swers, Thiobud merely shrugged, glanced to see that the white rag was still a-dangle from the pole resting its butt end in the lance socket and rode on—but before he came within arrow range he tied the pole to the harness and raised both his hands, guiding his mount with his knees.

He had never seen Zons this close before. He asked himself: apart from the neat and trim lines of their winter furs, in exactly what way did they differ from others? A wooden gong made from a slit and hollowed log hung from a tripod and the guard standing by it with beater raised was unmistakably a woman. The one in the doorway, whose bow and nocked arrow followed him as he approached, might have been a boy. Any female curves either might have had were lost in the concealing furs. Friendship on their faces would have surprised him; its absence did not. Neither was fear there, nor alarm, nor hatred—chiefly a certain cool caution. But besides and beyond any expression familiar to him he saw on both their faces a common expression which was not. He could not as yet define it, more than to say in his mind that it was strange, that they both had it, this look—that they were both Zons—and so his mind said, *It is the Zon look* . . . Well. He had heard. Now he saw. And if he were careful and if luck were with him and if he "had a good witch," he would likely see before very long a number of other things of which he had until now only heard.

And if he were careless or luck were not with him or he "had a bad witch" he might find himself at the bottom of a very deep and very dark pit with several Zon arrows in between his ribs and at least one in his heart.

THE guards at First Post had not precisely welcomed him, but he had not expected them to. He was the fly and they the spider, he entered at his own risk and he knew at least in general terms the perils of the web. In fact, he thought, with a sudden smile quirking a corner of his mouth, that sounded like a not-bad title for a minor epic, to be recited in meter to the accompaniment of one or two strings and a small hand-drum: *The Perils of the Web* . . . A gust of wind came whistling down the valley, froze his grin. He tugged his hood tighter about his face. Greater risks or not, he would they had allowed him to go by the burrough-ways.

No—welcomed he had not been—but the rule was that a whiteragger was entitled to pass and, as the stocky old saltmaster (where had they all vanished to—and how fast—and why?) had pointed out, Zons kept to the rule. No doubt they had helped make it, too. Certainly it benefited them as well, being as

they were so far outside the general order of things with their manless society, to help create and maintain an order above all local orders, above even the general order of things. For it was the rule alone and only the rule which enabled them on their periodic rounds to ride up, whiteragging, to any burrough, to engage in that curious spectacle in which their well-trained ponies would rhythmically stamp the ground above the burroughs—an unmistakable signal—and to proclaim to the multitude of never-friendly faces that they were there to accept any recruits . . . any prisoners . . . any children for "adoption or education" . . . any . . . so long as they were female.

Never a pleasant scene. Often: howls, hoots, jeers.

But the rule was the rule.

And sometimes they did not ride away unaccompanied.

Now Thiobud (the son of Phiniad the son of Thiobud son of Panerad son of Phiniad and so on and on) was himself benefiting. The guards had not cared for his use of the term *freeling*—a good thing to have realized, a piece of information he would keep in mind and pass along for the future—and certainly they would have cared even less for *an unmanned woman*, archaic phrase in any case and ludicrously inapplicable to one raised from childhood by the Zons. So he was obliged to explain that what he meant, exactly, was: *A woman who had been raised among the Zons from childhood but who had not yet taken the Zon-pledge and so was hence able to leave if she so desired.*

The proper term, he soon learned, was "a foster-guest."

Callers such as he did not come often. That was apparent. But something else was apparent, too—it was in the air, it was evident in certain hesitancies, certain glances. And he had no idea what it was or even might be. They had signaled on ahead by gong-beats, which of course conveyed nothing to him, and he had been allowed to ride on. Several guardposts later it had begun to snow and he was beginning to fear that he might perhaps miss his turn-in (or its guards miss him) and ride by it—which brought up not only the risk of freezing to death but the probably greater risk of his being shot at when he appeared in an area where he was not supposed to be . . . small use a white rag against the white blinding blanket of the snow.

But he did not miss it. The ground was rising now and he was on the lookout. He saw the great stone gates and he saw the guardpost house and the by now familiar gong and tripod (house and gong and tripod all three much larger than those of the outposts)—but he saw no one on guard.

He waited long but the cold overcame his caution—or, rather,

under those towering crags, of all Scopus landmarks the best known, and in that snow and wind the cold provided a caution of its own. So he called out his coming and rode up to the post house.

Lamps had been lit and a brick box with a metal door radiated heat but no one was within.

Quite a while he stayed there. Then he heard his pony pawing the ground. Then the wind changed its direction and he realized that the noise he had (without especially considering it) assumed to be the wind was only in part the wind. And was in part—

What?

He sighed, shook his head, went out, brought his beast under the eaves of the house and poured grain into the small basket for it. Then he took up his pole and the small bit of cloth to which he trusted his life—and he went on through the great stone gate.

THE Upper Entrance to Scopus burroughs was marked by a huge triple arch carved out of living rock. The spaces enclosed within the outlines of the treble curves were crowded with bas-reliefs and statues illustrative of the histories of the first three kings but statues and reliefs alike were clotted with snow. Beneath the pediment a vast door for each arch had long ago been cut into the rock—or, precisely, the lineaments of vast doors. The doors were for the most part false—rock faces did not swing upon rock hinges—but the lowermost panels were true doors and, as Thiobud came trudging through the road, he saw these doors were swung open wide. The interior blazed with light. A huge tent was in process of being erected and at least a full thousand Zons in every state of dress and undress swarmed around. Some raced up with poles, others heaved upon ropes, some swept from the holes socketed in the ground the snow that clogged them—others kneeled and scooped it out with bare hands, snow falling upon their bare shoulders. Others, while parts of the huge pavilion still sagged and billowed, came tottering forward with rugs and carpets which at once were unrolled. Others staggered beneath the weight of furniture. He saw at least fifty of them bringing in braziers, saw the braziers' red eyes winking and blinking in the uncertain wind.

No one seemed to see him at all.

And now another mass seemed not so much to exit from the huge gaping mouth of the Upper Entrance as to eddy about in it, now forward, now slightly backward, now slightly to one side, a bit forward—and, as the last section of the huge tent reared upright and settled slightly, its rich red and purple folds brightening the darkening day, this new mass of people passed slowly forward and out

of the gates and into the pavilion and was hidden from his sight.

A sight so strange this was that Thiobud, observing in open-mouthed astonishment, could hardly be sure of what was happening. But he saw that some, at least, of those emergent had been carrying something upon their shoulders. He thought it looked like a sort of bed—did he also have a glimpse of black hair rolling and tossing in a brief gust of wind? Of a gray face moving from side to side?

The wind of a fierce sudden blew back his hood and his hand moved automatically to restore it—did the gray face (if such it was) turn in his direction? Did a tiny hand fling itself toward him? Did not his eye-stone briefly tingle?

It had all happened in so brief a time that he could be sure of none of it. He saw the gold embroidered tent flaps sink slowly downward. He saw all but one of the doors of the Upper Entrance swing shut.

And stood as alone as before, unknowing what to do.

THE motives of one chosen as Zonvizier are notoriously mixed. On the one hand there is the immediate access to great power and prestige via the office of Second Servant of the Burroughs—the First Servant, of course, being the King herself. On the other hand there is the instant realization that whoso has ever held the office of Second Servant may never aspire to hold that of First—and, for that matter, may never even be certain of continuing to hold that of second.

Zon kings never retire and never resign and are never (but never, never) deposed. Zonviziers, on the other hand, hold office solely by the pleasure of the supreme office-holder. And this pleasure is often such by conventional designation alone. In burroughs (not, of course, in Scopus burroughs) where intrigue rather than industry, the arts, affections or any other emotion or combination of emotions holds sway, it is not unknown for a potential trouble-maker to occupy the Second Seat for a very brief time indeed. In the morning the would-be disturber of the scene is called before the First Seat and handed the symbolic Shield of Office—in the evening the Zonvizier hands it back to the Father Mother King. Who hands it back to her. Except that in such cases there comes an evening when the Father Mother King does not hand it back.

"Go and rest," says the First Servant to the Second.

And: "Yes, Father Mother—" says the now-without-office.

To others she says, "Father Mother has been pleased to allow me to rest."

And they reply—if they truly are her friends—"How fortunate you are. Burdens chafe and heavy

burdens usually chafe heavily."

Except that sometimes, instead of letting their eyes fall or sighing sympathetically or offering a love-gesture, they say, "Well, that didn't last long, did it? Didn't I tell you that you should (or should not) have done thus and so? Ah, but no, you would not listen—no, not you. Well. Ah!"

She then knows that these are not her true friends and never were but of course it is too late. Those who hold no power can bestow none and so by the brief bestowal of glory the possibility of their ever holding the greatest of glories is forever removed.

But King Morgan had never felt the need to use such tactics—quite the opposite. It was said, though never of course in the presence of a Zonvizier, that Morgan felt it would be unwise in the extreme ever to appoint to the Second Seat anyone who either aspired to the First or who was capable of filling it.

"I govern while I live," was the precise way she put it. "And after I cease to live I shall cease at all to govern."

In other words, she would take no steps to disqualify as her successor any who might otherwise be qualified to succeed her. In some measure, therefore, the aura of the zonviziership was dimmed and for over a generation it had been held by a succession of nonentities. The present occupant was a Captain Krug (between the captaincy and the viziership there were no active ranks), massive, stolid, more than somewhat dim in personality. Captain Krug, as captain, had gone by the rule and by the direction of her superiors. Zonvizier Krug, as Zonvizier, did the same.

Whenever possible.

At present, however, the Zonvizier scarcely knew what was possible and what was not. A king did not die every day and Krug, who was in middle-age, scarcely remembered the death of the last one. She had certainly not taken Zonvows at the time and so had been obliged to do nothing but weep and follow the prescribed mourning. No doubt the rule had something to say but the knowledge of it had dimmed, ebbed, since then. No doubt there were a few aged Zons about who might remember something.

But not only could the Second Servant not ask the First, "What must I do in this—the matter of your dying?"

Even if the Morgan King were all sharp of mind the Second Servant could not have brought her tongue to say it. She could not bring her tongue to state that it was indeed fell death and not illness alone that stalked the burroughs of the Valley of Scopus. She had an all but fully formed belief that, were she to ask in what manner she should act about the king's death or dying the pace of

dying might immediately increase.

Not knowing what to do the Zonvizier did nothing or did whatever the loudest voice suggested she do—assuming it was not against the rule. The face of Captain Rack was just a face to the zonvizier—but it was the face of a captain and, hence, the face of one entitled to suggest things in a loud voice. The Hodus Memissary was in the same category—no, in a higher one, for the Zonvizier herself had invested the Madame Sir with the customary and honorary rank of captain of captains, which in theory at least placed her below only the Zonvizier. There was nothing, to be sure, in the rule or any other customary usage about erecting the King's Pavilion in the winter—but there had been a few occasions when it had been erected only because Father Mother Morgan had felt unwell and not for the more usual purposes of ceremony.

Captain Rack spoke loudly—the Memissary smiled her cool and enigmatic smile, the Zonvizier—half-distracted with grief and confusion—gave the orders.

Someone was to be sent for—the King had mentioned . . .

The King had mentioned! The vizier's middle-aged mind, numbed with sorrow and indecision, seized upon this single point. It meant doing at last something one knew that Morgan King had wanted done. The zonvizierial fingers were snapped. Equerries sprang to the zonvizierial side. Heads were bowed respectfully.

"Let the Second Seat say—"

The Second Seat said, "Let the young person Tintinna be at once brought here—that is, not here—we are all going above in order that Father Mother escape this overheat. The Great Pavilion—escort her there at once—at once—at once—"

The Memissary smiled.

Captain Rack did not.

THIOBUD thought that the snow-laden winds, grown tired of their amorphous writhings, had taken on shapes and forms. In a moment, though, he realized that the forms were those of people. They spoke to him, gestured, laid their fingers on the sleeves of his jacket. Their faces and their eyes were red—and somehow he judged that this was not from cold. He had for some while prior to this been not aware of the cold. It was the all-encompassing element, it had conquered and transformed the air, had in fact become the air and one usually takes the air for granted. Now, suddenly, he was again aware of the cold and aware of his weariness—he bent his head submissively and began to follow the shapes.

But they had stopped.

For one long second they gazed at him. The the nighest one gently (it seemed gently) put up her long, thin, gauntleted hand and pulled

down his hood. He had hardly been aware it had slipped. And then, together, they went at a quick pace to the great tent. For a brief moment in the waning day the flurry of snow halted and a thin effusion of the ruddy light of sunset made the purple covering seem somewhat crimson. Then this all vanished. The shadows on the snow were blue and the great pavilion itself turned black.

Those standing on guard just inside the entrance, furs opened and displaying habits of black adorned with gold-broidered work, gave low exclamations of astonishment as the others entered.

"Then there *was* a person—'outside,' " one of them said wonderingly. "Just as Father Mother said—"

"Just as she said. And—"

But one of his guides shook her head, as though to cut off further comment. She placed her hand upon his sleeve and drew him along through the throng of turning heads and opening mouths, through the sudden drop in the low-pitched hum of conversation, through the deepening silence. Incredible, incredible—a swarm of people and all of them women! And all of them—ah, well—all of them had the Zon look. How old did they have to be before they took the oath or pledge? Nor was it that they all looked at him with hate, though hate was there—at least on some faces—it wasn't even that he was a man, rare though men must be in any Zon burrough or encampment. It was simply the look.

"Father Mother, here is he."

The black hair (dyed, it must be dyed), the old, gray, sunken face, the incredibly rich coverlets and furs, of the woman lying there on what in that brief glimpse he had believed might be a bed. It was doing duty as one now, resting at bed height off the floor; actually it was a sort of litter or palanquin. Had she, whoever she was, actually seen him there outside as they bore her in? The lids fluttered up from the sunken eyes, huge and gray and glazed, barely focused, barely aware of anything any longer. The shrunken lips seemed to struggle, uncertain as to whether to permit or restrain the tongue which at last emerged, then retreated.

What was it she was saying?

"—the cockerel, the cockerel—"

Someone said, "Yes, Father Mother!"

Someone else with a light touch took hold of the hood of his jacket and pulled it back and down. He could feel, as he always felt, the roach of red hair rising as it was released from the pressure of the hood. And he felt—was aware of—the throng's reaction even before he heard it gasp.

"—the cockerel," moaned, mumbled the very old woman.

"Yes, Father Mother," the

crowd said, sighed and echoed.

There was a stir not from the far edge of the old woman's litter and a clump or cluster which till then had been an undifferentiated part of the throng now seemed to part from it. Once again he felt something for which he could find no words, as though (and now he seemed to have a clearer image of it) as though something soft and velvet-webby was moving inside his mind, stroking his brain. At once, abruptly, it ceased to be pleasant —a sensation like vertigo hit him hard. Dressed in black robes of wide cut, slashed with scarlet, black-peaked bonnets from head to shoulders and scarlet beneath—it might have been ten women, it may have been twenty—moved, swayed, looked at him, threw up their hands in a sinuous gesture which seemed to run through them like a wave. He pushed back against the ugly, dull feeling—it vanished.

Someone in his ear said, very low, "The witches—"

Now these women set up a keening and repeated one sound three times.

"Oh—"

"Woe—"

"No—"

Uneasy was the throng.

A voice said, "Silence!"

A voice said, "As Father Mother wishes."

A voice said, "Your beloved Morgan King—"

Not quite had each voice spoken together with each other voice. He glanced away from the mass of witch women while the voices still sounded, superimposing their own notes upon the other ones. He saw the sullen, blocklike face he did not know was that of Captain Rack. He saw the sturdy and bewildered face he did not know was that of the Zonvizier—saw the long and gracious and cryptically smiling face he did not know was that of the Memissary. He saw, too, a fourth face, a younger face, felt a stir of something more than merely interest. It was not alone that this was the youngest face, certainly, in all this crowded pavilion, not alone that it was by no means an uncomely face—something more stroked softly across his mind.

It was the only face there that did not have the Zon-look. And the absence of it was as unmistakable as its presence.

V

HE HAD not realized how grateful he had been of the warmth until once more he was out in the cold. Now it was the snow and the outside again and altogether the wrong time of day—night? But another pony was trotting along beside his and someone else sat the second pony. A third one with no rider but a deal of gear was coming along behind. It

had all been so easy. It had perhaps been too easy. There had hardly been a parley at all. He had thought of what he would say and no one had asked him to say anything. He had thought there would be great hostility toward him and it had not been directed toward him at all. He had thought to initiate a talk about a woman, no doubt to return again to continue it, to see her, to consider, to return perhaps a third time—perhaps not to return ever. But it had not happened at all like that. And here he was, riding through the darkness and the snow with the woman. He corrected his thoughts: With *a* woman. How could he possibly, in such a brief course of time, know.

Something shrilled in his ears. Without thinking he flinched away from it, found himself hanging over his mount's neck. What in witchbane was it? It was she, the girl or woman, he scarcely knew—it was a whistle she had in her mouth, on a lanyard. An odd white whistle of a sort he'd never seen before and she blew those horrid shrills upon it—but why?

When she had to cover her own ears?

No, she was not muffling her ears. She was cupping them, not trying to muffle the sound but to amplify it. He fell behind her and at once realized something as odd as all the rest of it—he could see her cheeks puffed out as she blew upon that devilish little pipe but he could no longer hear it. Perhaps it had clogged? No—in that instant she veered her pony around and came abreast of him without ceasing to blow and the instant they drew level he once again heard it and he cried out.

At once she stopped. Stopped the whistle, stopped the pony.

"I am sorry," she said. Her voice was the same here as it had been back there, not that he had heard much of what she said, not that she had said much—mostly farewells and thanks. Certainly something of the Zon speech was in her voice—but something was in it which was not. There seemed a faint drawling trace of the speech of a burrough he could almost identify—unimportant, that, now. "But it was necessary. We go this way now. Please?"

He muttered, "Of course—you know that we must soon take shelter?" She nodded. "What is that? Zon witch-magic?"

She seemed to consider how to explain it, then said, "I am trying to find my bearings here in the snow and the dark. The snow distorts the echoes but I think we are going the right way now. Do you know my name?" she asked. "It is Tintinna."

"And mine is Thiobud. They call me—it is very strange—no, I suppose not so very. Well, they call me Rooster."

"The cockerel," she said. "Yes, it is the same thing, I suppose.

Mother spoke of that before she saw you tonight, did you know that? She has been speaking of that for a few days now. 'The cockeral and the hen.' "

Mainly he had shelter in mind. Vaguely he did not relish the notion of viewing their relationship (whatever it was or was not to be) on the simple level of the poultry coop. He peered through the formless dark, could see nothing. She had blown her mad whistle so that she could listen to the echoes. Like a bat.

Abruptly she said, "No, it wasn't that, it's—oh, a new child is always called a 'chick.' But it was just that I was sort of Mother's pet and she called me her hen—that's all. And," she said, still softly, yet firmly, "there was nothing of *that* between us—or any of them—or else it's not likely they'd have sent me off so simply, so soon. Not that I haven't been ready to go for a while now. But you mustn't take anything for granted."

They were on windswept land now. The hooves rang hard and loud on the rock-hard ground. And the way was up.

He said, "I did not think—" and paused, uncertain of how he should word it.

"If not now, later. It would be inevitable—that you at least think about it. Zon is Zon, after all. But I am not Zon. Still—" and a sound in the darkness made his heart warm toward her, for he knew that she was laughing there in the darkness of the winter night—with a stranger. "Still," she said again, "Zon is Zon. Up to the last minute. That old Memissary, the one in the brown robes with the huge ivory necklace—you know, she didn't want me to go. I don't know why—not love, I'm sure of that. But poor Rack—she thought it was. Oh, her poor face! That was why she kept practically shouting in the poor old Zonvizier's ear, *Father Mother wants them away*— And, well, who knows what the poor old thing really wants? A prophecy? Rack made it out to be one. Still, even if Morgan had prophesied your coming, even if she did foresee our being together, who knows that she wanted it so? The witches didn't like your reek at all, did they? Hold on!"

There was a scan of ice and the ponies slipped and slithered, then righted themselves. Then there was a wall upon the right, then one upon the left. Then—echo, echo, echo—suddenly Tintinna let out a whoop and the echoes rolled and multiplied and he knew that they were inside a burrough.

AND still the death-watch continued. Extra braziers were brought and, swiftly, deftly, blankets were held up to them to be warmed. Deftly, swiftly the ones on the Zon King's bed were rolled

halfway off and fresh ones rolled halfway, then all the way. The Second Servant snored in her chair and most of the former watchers had retired to their own cells for rest. Some, however, had rolled into their furs and lay upon the rugs—now and then walking and rising and watching, sometimes silently, sometimes murmuring to others, usually returning to the rugs for further slumber.

The Memissary had made some concession to her own weariness. She sat upon a stool and her heavy necklace reposed upon her lap where her fingers told the tusks over and over again, as though she were reading a tape. She faced the crouching clusters of witches, a sunken, sullen huddle of black and red.

"Great is the strength of the Morgan King," she said.

After their customary usage they answered her in turn.

"Ah, Mem—her strength is great but—"

"—the truth is, although great strength—"

"—is in her yet, yet her strength is not—"

"—great at all. Ah, nay, Mem, for—"

"—it is our strength which sustains it, as—"

"—one sustains a fire by blowing on it but—"

"—for this fire, Mem, ah, there is no—"

"—more fuel, ah—"

"*No*—" They rocked their heads.

"*Oh*—" They waved their hands.

"*Woe*—" They sobbed and wailed.

"Nor for much longer—can we thus sustain—our Kingly Lady dear—it is only that we hope—she may yet return her mind—and reveal to all—or at least, at least—to us, to us—who shall next ascend—ascend, ascend—who shall next ascend—the Primest Place—the First Seat—but we fear, we fear—we fear, we fear—not here alone—not here alone—" They chanted and they wailed, swaying from side to side, lolling their heads and rolling their eyes.

The upraised hand of the Memissary was long and slender. She lowered two fingers, placed her thumb on one. The chanting stopped. With dull and reddened eyes they looked at the hand, wetted their cracked lips, breathed noisily through their nostrils. The hand sank once more into the Memissary's lap, once more her other hand caressed the sea-morse tusks.

The Mem had no need to raise her voice.

"I know what it is you fear. I fear it as well. My own witches have warned me—us—that is, the wise ones of my own burrough. Besides, there have been signs. Dreams. Waking warnings—"

The witches sighed and the witches groaned. They had the

witch-puffed lips—they had the witch-puffed eyelids, and their hands were puffy with witch-puffed flesh that gave off the witch-bitter reek. Small need then, if identification were desired, for silk-smooth black and the inner lining of blood-slick red.

Their faces were turned full on the Memissary and all their mouths were opened but she flinched not at all from the witch-stale rancor of their witch-stench breath.

"Wise women, wise ones, sisters sage, something trembles in the stillness of night, something whispers in the silence of the stars, something very ancient desires not to be discerned while it struggles to be born anew."

"*Oh—no—woe. What may we do?*"

The delegate bent her long and comely neck. The witches slithered closer and raised their heads, open-mouthed. An observer might have thought, had she or he been accustomed to think in terms so unhuman, that here was a cobra feeding frogs.

"Listen," she said and her voice was cool and her voice was low and her eyes glittered and the breath hung thin and pale upon the thick, stale air. "Listen, my lovelies and my loves—ah—*listen!*"

PRESENTLY the quality of echo altered and almost at that instant the lead pony stopped. At once he heard her dismounting and then making the little muttering noises a woman uses when she searches for something, the location of which she feels she knows absolutely and which she somehow cannot find. A grunt succeeded these homey sounds and then there appeared in the darkness a dim glow that spurted into a ragged blaze of light against which he shielded his eyes. The light settled into the symmetrical flame of a torch blazing evenly where there is no breeze. She was holding it out to him and, he having taken it, she reached her hand into a kind of press or cabinet carved into the wall and took out another torch. It blazed up in her hand.

After seconds, during which he blinked, he asked, "How did that happen? The torch catching fire just like that?"

"It did not really. That's a photon pile. You don't understand me? and if I said *stasis, non-stasis, sapce, time, energy, matter, technology*—would you understand me? No, not even in Orth. Well, so I made it light by Zon witch-magic."

It seemed that this explanation quite satisfied her. It had to do for him and, for the moment, he left it so and began to divide his attention between his new surroundings and his new companion. Here, it seemed, was a very old type of

burrough indeed, for the echoes had indicated their entrance had been by the customary corridors and now they were entering what was obviously a natural cave or cavern. Such types had eventually fallen into desuetude; they were felt to imply a lack of craftsmanship and sophistication—also, they were felt not to feel snug.

As for the girl—

He swung about on his seat, the torch flaring somewhat from his sudden movement. He saw, close by the compartment where the lights had been stored, a door slowly closing. But it was impossible, both by virtue of the insufficient light and its flickering and by the distance, for him to say if or not it was being closed by whom.

Or what.

He felt wonder. He was aware that he ought to feel fear but was by no means certain that he did.

Things had been calculated rather to a nicety in these corridors, for scarcely had the torches begun to flutter and blink and give less and less light than they came to another place where torches were stored; it was well before this second issue was exhausted that they reached what was evidently their destination for the balance of the night. She looked up at his drawn-out sigh of sheer wonder, smiled faintly and dismounted. If one could imagine such a thing as a vast stone house set squarely upon the top of another such, a third upon the second and a fourth and fifth and sixth resting upon each other, then imagination would supply the likeliness of what he saw before them. All was made—evidently—not by piling stones upon stones but by carving this incredible series of pseudostructures from the face of the living rock of the cavern.

It had not been too long since others had last visited this place, for the bin of broken sweetpods from which she filled the ponies' feed baskets smelled merely faintly musty, the pods were not moldy at all. The animals gave two somewhat dubious sniffs of inquiry and set to eating. Water for them ebbed from a cut in the wall into shallow troughs, overflowed into a channel which crossed the floor and vanished into darkness. Tintinna unloaded and unsaddled her mount and he, having followed her example, helped with the pack beast, the torches reposing in brackets behind which the soot of centuries (and perhaps centuries ago) had stained the walls.

From one of her pouches she withdrew a long lanyard of finely braided colored leathers on which was a single, slender piece of metal. This she dipped into the water and then slipped it into the keyhole of the door.

"A curious kind of key," he said, "which has neither any wards or any notches—"

All her answer was, "Indeed it is."

She found lamps that flicked magically into light with a smoother and smaller illumination than the torches and set them on trays and he took one of the trays and followed her. Presently a series of rooms were illuminated, all furnished with everything not merely needful but desirable, from the mats under the rugs to the hangings on the walls, chairs, tables, divans, couches, cushions. There was food, too, in abundance, and wines and cordials in bottles which sparkled their various colors in the lamplight.

"The last time I was here," she said, "was with Mother. We ate together—here, at this table. I set it, just as I did tonight. And now —strange—I had never heard of you until a few hours ago and I know nothing about you except your name and burrough and descent— Mother—I suppose—will never eat again."

They sipped at something dark and clear and red that tasted sweet and left a crisp, tart aftereffect upon the tongue.

"Were you fond of her?"

She considered her glass and his question. "I was fond of her," she said. "But not very. Now you—"

"What?"

"That is what I ask. 'What?' I have never lain with any man and I don't know if I shall with you. I don't know, even, if that's your purpose. Certainly it is not your only purpose. You have not made the long journey from Orth and at this time of year just to get a woman. And I'm sure you hadn't come with tales of trade and barter and tales of tribute and this and that just to get a woman who had had an education. Orth, I am sure, does not lack for learning. Nor does Orth need to make alliances on such a basis. It's well you came, you know. I made no objection to going."

He passed his hand along his crest and, holding out his glass, "I noticed," he said. He held the glass and squinted through it toward a lamp. Here was richness indeed! Merely a casual meal and no great ceremony—fine liqueurs, and no candles of smelly tallow, softening as they burned but lamps that burned magically without smoke.

"A Zon burrough is never at its best when the Zon King dies. There's always a question of succession and the more one is assured that 'here there is no question' the more one may be certain that a question there is or will be indeed. And for one such as me, partly outsider and partly—well —let us say that my position was anomalous—"

Recollection of those swarming, stalwart, grim-faced females made him wince. If such was the way they were while their king still lived he could imagine—rather, he

did not care to imagine—what they might be like when she was dead and a new one not yet on the throne. Or, if one preferred, on the First Seat. And yet it was certain that it was only because he had come at that time and no other that this fortuitous concourse of events had taken place. Fortuitous? Or was it that he had a good witch? If he had, well, certainly she was not among that flock of sullen harpies who had moaned and crooned their distaste, their displeasure and their distrust of him.

"Yes, your position now, I can see—would be anomalous. But what was your position before?"

She looked at him steadily and thoughtfully. "I think that what you mean is, not what was my position just before Mother—before the Morgan King fell ill, but what was it, basically, all along? That is, what was the reason for my being in the burroughs of the Scopus Zon? You do mean—Yes. . .

"Well," she sighed faintly, "that takes us back to my own mother, my blood-mother, I mean—and *that*—I hope you are patient—takes us back to my grandfather. My maternal grandfather. He was a person of some importance among the northern sea-burroughs. There were intrigues. Threats of insurrections, invasions, oh, the usual ugly scenes. And, being a prudent as well as an important person, he sent my mother—she was only a child—over to Scopus with a considerable present. She was to be educated but she was under no circumstances to be allowed to take the Zon-vows until she had voluntarily returned to her natal place and lived there one year. If, after that time, she voluntarily returned to Scopus or went to any other Zon place—well, then she could do as she pleased.

"Grandfather evidently acted just in time. The whole of the northern sea-burroughs went into turmoil almost right after that and he was killed. Things settled down and were still quiet when she—when my blood-mother returned. I have a notion that she didn't intend to stay more than that year—but she met my father and he was really made to order for her purposes in fact, meeting him must have shown her what her purposes really were."

Her purposes were to find the way to power, take power, hold power. And here was a charming and widely popular man on the road to legitimate power which he did not particularly desire and which he was certainly and basically too weak to hold for long after he had it. He wanted whatever attracted him at any moment and what attracted him the moment he saw the newly arrived and long-away young woman was she. Calymon was his name, Poridel was

hers—the wedding was famous for years afterward. Accession to office followed not long after. Calymon soon tired of it but Poridel did not. Therefore Calymon continued to hold office and, through him, so did Poridel.

"He hadn't really known how you stayed in office," his daughter said. "He thought it was done the same way you entered office. He thought it was because the people liked you and he thought they liked you because you were likable. But she knew better. You can't imagine how useful the Zon training had been for her. She spun webs of intrigue around the other intriguers while they were still laboriously spinning single threads. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do—in fact, there was scarcely anything she didn't do. And he found out. And it killed him."

The final blow was the discovery of his wife's connection with Arteman, a younger and more vigorous version of himself. And, while Calymon lay with his face turned to the wall of his chamber, Arteman was inducted as his successor. Then Calymon covered his face and died. Difficulties? Not because of that—but difficulties certainly. Certainly Poridel wanted power, but she wanted other things as well. Arteman, for example. Arteman was much like Calymon, but Tintinna was Calymon's daughter—she was not Arteman's.

"I was thirteen. She found us together. He was holding me around the waist and I was hitting him and he was laughing. . . Oh, witches! Her face—"

Thiobud said, "And so she did the same thing her father had done. Sent you to Scopus. To protect you."

The quiet mask of her face vanished. "To protect me?" she cried, incredulous. "She would have dropped me over a cliff if it could have been done without notice. But, as it couldn't, she sent me to Scopus. And there I was. It's been five years."

"But I don't see—I mean, surely if you were to return now, after five years, wouldn't he—that is—"

A faint smile twisted its way across her face and was in a moment gone. "You mean, she will be five years less desirable and I will be five years more? Don't think she wasn't able to see that. But her hope was that I would, if you follow me, get so Zon that even if I returned and even if Arteman played at me again I'd repulse him, not from fright as before, but as I'd repulse any man. So she hoped.

"Nice, isn't it?"

He grimaced and then, as she got up and reached for a lamp, resolution, if not conviction, snapped up his head. She stood very still, her fingers just touching the lamp, having caught the slight movement. She looked at him in-

tently and without expression.

"Neither do I know," he said, "if your old Mother King was a true prophet. And may never know. But I need not see every spoke to surmise a wheel. Listen, Tintinna, I had come to Zon to make a parley about you, although I didn't know that you were you. I feel now, indeed, that you are woman enough for any man, as I do feel myself man enough for any woman. But there is far more than that and this more either affects us both together or not at all and never. Will you resolve now to come with me, unharmed and unpressed, to Orth Burrough, and there hear and listen and there decide?"

She handed him the lamp. He took it with one hand and took her hand with the other and he blew out the lamp. She took shelter in his cloak. She laughed. She kissed him. And, trusting, with a stranger, slept. Thiobud, dreaming, brought her safely home. ●

TROUBLESHOOTER

(Continued from page 37)

"What's odd?"

"I remember these bearings. I punched them on the keyboard myself yesterday. I saw a dust-cloud on the viewscreen—too thin to register on the radar but I thought it advisable to avoid it as it may have contained particles of sufficient size to puncture the hull. You can't be too careful with clouds. It was just before your watch and I thought you might not appreciate the danger."

Or you might, DeGrazza, have plunged straight into the cloud, daring with deathwish and heedless for the life on an alien who, to you, is one step from the ape, although pervertedly telepathic. And the alien wishes to live because that is the way of his kind, as it should be the way of yours. But you must hurry to death because it will be so pleasant then not to have to hurry . . .

"You didn't instruct the brain telepathically?"

"The brain is only for use when the computer breaks down," replied the alien stiffly. "Although the brain would know of the bearings because it checks all keyboard information."

"So something threw the brain back in time." DeGrazza pondered. "I wonder—wait a moment. You fed in these bearings just before your sleep period?"

"That's right."

Suddenly the whole scene of the near-disaster flashed back through DeGrazza's mind—the asteroid sliding into the viewscreen, his own sense of danger, his fingers poised over the controls, the asteroid growing, the mountains becoming clear and huge, the alien dozing beside him, his eyelids fluttering, fluttering . . .

And the sudden veering plunge into danger.

"That's it!" gasped DeGrazza.

"THEY call them REM's," he explained to the alien. The rapid eye movements visible through the lids which signify that a sleeper is dreaming. You were dreaming just before the ship went out of control—I saw you. You were also asleep the first time we lost control, two days ago, although you woke up and brought the ship around."

"I don't see the connection."

"I'll tell you. In the mid-twentieth century an Earth doctor made an analogy between the brain and the computer suggesting that the purpose of sleep was to dream. Dreaming in effect cleared the mind of extraneous, accumulated dross, just as you clear a computer before reprograming. He carried out tests with people and computers, depriving them of dreams and clearing respectively. Both men and machines showed similar resultant hallucinatory behavior patterns."

"I've heard that theory."

"You see the implication? You're a pilot, you love your job, you shuttle to and fro between Altair Six and Eight all the time. Navigation is part of your job, you love it. You live by the compass, eat by the compass. You read bearings, you punch bearings, you sleep bearings.

"You dream bearings . . .

"And the brain will pick up a projected, telepathic dream of a series of bearings and assume that it is a direct instruction and act accordingly, as it has been taught, overruling the computer, radar, common sense and everything else. Not realizing, because it can't, that your mind is clearing itself in sleep."

There was a long, thoughtful silence. The viewscreen was emptying now, the larger asteroids drifting behind; just the thin sprinkling of twinkling dots left, through which the computer eased the ship with unerring precision. And beyond the dust, the point of light that was Altair VIII was swelling into a glowing disc. DeGrazza relaxed in his seat, contemplating a long stay on the destination planet before returning home. He reckoned he'd earned it.

You were right, DeGrazza. The solution to the problem is in the Altairid mind. And now you can

go home to Mary and Cobb and the future because you know that they will want you back quickly for your earnings and your intelligence, if not for yourself. Forget that long holiday—there's no point in thinking about it because you know you will not stay here. You must hurry forward again, consuming the future as it comes because that is your true way, consume avidly and avoid skillfully, wherever you sense it, the strychnine of death. Until, one day, the promise of the pill is too sweet . . . But not this time. Next?

At last the alien spoke. "I fear there is much in what you say. I will go so far as to say that, in my opinion, you are right. I, too, have read with interest the writings of your Evans school of thought on dreams, yet the solution did not occur to me. It is sad to think that, in our efforts to make interplanetary travel safer, we have achieved the opposite. What are your suggestions?"

"As I said before, the computers have never failed yet. You'll have to remove the brains."

"True," sighed the Altairid. "We cannot prevent ourselves from dreaming."

True indeed, thought DeGrazza with an inward clutch of premonition. As the ship sped on the final day of its journey to Altair VIII he wondered what the next night would contain and whether his dream fireball would be replaced by jagged asteroid peaks and black ravines, hurtling towards him at colossal speed.

If only it were as simple as, say, pressing a button to clear a computer.

Goodbye, DeGrazza of the tortured mind and plunging compulsions. We cannot feel superiority, only sympathy—because on this occasion you have taught us; yet there is so much we could teach you, if you would let us. But you are so immersed in self-pity that you are hardly aware of those about you—Mary, Cobb and—the Altairid.

DeGrazza and Earth, I thank you on behalf of Altair. And you don't even know my name . . . ●

 (Continued from page 56)

"In that case—they—or it—"

"He," Retief amended.

"HE'S overheard every word that's been spoken since we landed." Magnan addressed the blossoms directly. "Look here, Herby—you're aware that we're distressed diplomats, marooned here by an unfortunate accident—"

"I thought Slith and that other fellow—Okkyokk—were responsible," Herby corrected. "They seem dreadfully argumentive chaps. I do wish they'd lower their voices."

"Quite—now, you're aware of their hostile intentions toward Mr. Retief and myself—"

"Oh, my," Herby interrupted, "they do seem upset. Such language—"

"Yes. As I was saying—" Magnan paused. "What do you mean, 'such language?' "

"I was referring to Grand Commander Slith's rather graphic use of invective," Herby explained. "Not that General Okkyokk isn't holding his own, of course. I must say my vocabulary is expanding rapidly."

"You speak as though you could hear them now."

"I can. On the ship-to-shore band."

"But—you don't have a radio—do you?"

"A what?"

"If he has organs for detecting sound," Retief said, "why not organs for picking up short wave?"

"Why—that's remarkable," Magnan exclaimed. "But short wave? It would be rather too much to hope that you can send as well as receive?"

"Why, I suppose I could transmit via my snarfnodes—if there were any reason to."

"Retief—we're saved! Herby—send the following message at once: Special Priority-Z Mayday, CDT Sector HQ, Aldo Cerise. CDT eight-seven-nine-oh-three, subject unprovoked attack—no, make that unwarranted attack—resulting in emergency planetfall and—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mister," Herby cut in. "I couldn't send that."

"Why not?"

"Why, if I did, some nose parker might come and take you away."

"I sincerely hope so."

"I've waited two hundred standard years for someone to talk to," Herby said in a hurt tone. "Now you're talking of rushing off. Well, I won't have it."

"The SOS is our sole hope," Magnan cried. "Would you stand in the way of our rescue?"

"Please calm yourself, Mister. Look at Retief. He's not making

a scene. Just resign yourself to the fact that you'll spend the rest of your life here and we'll get on famously—just as Renfrew and I did right up until the last few days."

"The rest of our lives?" Magnan gasped. "But that's unthinkable. We may linger on for another fifty years."

"Not if Slith has his way," Retief said. "Where are they now, Herby?"

"I was about to say," Herby began. "They'll be arriving any—"

THE vegetable voice was drowned by a rising drone that swelled swiftly to a bellowing roar. A sleek, shark-nosed shape swept overhead, followed by another, two more, then an entire squadron. Sonic booms crashed across the jungle, laying patterns of shock ripples across the still water of the lake. Treetops whipped in the turbulent wakes as two battle fleets hurtled past at low altitude, dwindled, were gone.

"You see?" Herby said a trifle breathlessly into the echoing silence. "Two's company but a crowd is altogether too much."

Retief twisted the knob of the radio slung at his belt.

"... pinpointed our quarry!" Slith's breath voice was keening. "If you will employ your units in encircling the south shore of the island, General, I shall close the pincer to the north."

"Looks like they've spotted us," Retief said. "Slith must carry better optical and IR gear than I gave him credit for."

Sunlight winked on distant craft circling back to spread out on the far side of the lake, sinking down out of sight behind the massed foliage of the forest. Other vessels were visible to left and right.

"Not much point in running cross-country," Retief said thoughtfully. "They've got us surrounded."

"What are we going to do?" Magnan yelped. "We can't just stand here."

"Ouch!" Herby said suddenly. "Ooh! Ahh!"

"What's the matter?" Magnan leaped in alarm, staring around him.

"Why that hurts like anything!" Herby exclaimed indignantly.

"It's the landing blasts." Retief indicated the smoke rising from points all around the compass. "The Groaci still use old-style reaction motors for atmospheric manuvering. Must be scorching Herby quite painfully."

"You see what sort of uncouth ruffians they are?" Magnan said indignantly. "Now wouldn't you like to change your mind, Herby, and assist us?"

"And collect a new crop of third-degree burns when your friends arrive? No, thank you. It's out of the question."

A deep-toned whickering sound had started up, grew quickly louder.

"A heli," Retief said. "They're not wasting any time."

In the shelter of the tree the two Terrans watched the approach of the small, speedy craft. It swung out over the lake, riffling the water, and hovered two hundred feet in the air.

"Attention, Terran spies!" an electronically amplified voice boomed out from it. "Surrender at once or suffer a fate unspeakable—"

"Herby—if those barbarians get their hands on us our usefulness as conversationalists will come to an abrupt end," Magnan said urgently.

"You have been warned," the PA blared. "Emerge at once empty-handed—"

"Maybe we can hide out in this dense growth," Magnan said, "if Herby will keep us apprised of their wherabouts. Maybe we can elude capture until help comes."

The copter had drifted closer.

"Thirty seconds," the big voice boomed. "If at the end of that time you have not submitted to Groaci justice the entire island will be engulfed in fire—"

"Cook us alive?" Magnan gasped. "They wouldn't—"

"Retief—Mister," Herby said worriedly. "Did he mean what he seemed to mean?"

"I'm afraid so, Herby," Retief said. "But don't worry. We won't let matters proceed that far. Shall we go, Mr. Magnan?"

Magnan swallowed with difficulty. "I suppose a comfortable garroting in a civilized cell is preferable to broiling alive," he said in a choked voice as they walked out from the shade into the bright orange sunlight of the beach.

V

"A WISE decision, Soft Ones," Slith whispered. "In return for your cooperation I give my reassurances that your remains will be transmitted to your loved ones suitably packaged, with a friendly note explaining that you fell foul of the alert Groacian anti-spy apparatus and were dispatched ere my personal intervention could save you from the just retribution your crimes deserved."

"Why, that's very thoughtful of you, I'm sure, Grand Commander," Magnan said, mustering a ghastly smile. "But might I suggest just one little change? Why not intervene just a bit sooner and return us safe and sound—a stirring gesture of inter-being amity."

"My researches into the Terran nature," Slith interrupted, steepling his eyes—an effect which failed to reassure his listeners—"indicate that your kith respond most generously to those who adhere to a policy of unswerving hostility. This evidence of Groaci

determination will evoke, I doubt not, a sizable increase in the Terran subsidy to the Keep Groac Gray drive—funds which will of course be quietly diverted to our urgently needed naval modernization program."

"But why?" Magnan clanked his chains disconsolately. "Why can't we all just be friends?"

"Alas," Slith said. "Aside from the fact that we Groaci find you Soft Ones singularly repellent to all nine senses, rendering social intercourse awkward—and the further fact that Terran ambitions conflict with manifest Groaci destiny—plus the fact that I owe you suitable recompense for your malicious sabotage of my mercantile efforts at Haunch Two—aside from these matters, I say—it's necessary at this juncture to silence you."

"Silence us?" Magnan said. "Why, heavens, Commander Slith—if you're referring to the little misunderstanding that led to our unscheduled landing here on Yudore, don't give it a thought. Why, I've already forgotten it. Actually, it was probably just pilot error on the part of my colleague, Mr. Retief—"

"He's not talking about that, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "He's talking about his use of Yudore as a red herring to cover an attack on the Slox Empire."

"Silence, verbose one," Slith said but Okkyokk, whose image on the conference screen had been quietly occupying a complicated perch in the background, spoke up.

"Who this? My fascinate! Gosh! Tell more!"

"Fool." Slith leaped to his feet, vibrating his throat sac at Retief. "Your groundless insinuations deprive you of life's last sweet moments." He signaled the guards. "On with the executions."

"Not so hurry, Five-eyes!" Okkyokk snarled. "Conversation me, Terry; my interest, oh, yes! Tell on!"

"Keep out of this, Okkyokk!" Slith snapped as the guards started forward eagerly.

"My listen!" Okkyokk yelled. "Your forgot, Slith—I guns train on you! My chat there Terry—blow your in fragmentation, or!"

"Better humor him, Slith," Retief said. "Inasmuch as your fleet consists of disguised barges with dummy guns, you're in no position to call his bluff."

Slith made spluttering sounds.

"No gun?" Okkyokk chortled. "Good new tonight! Tell Terry!"

"It's quite simple," Retief said. "Slith lured you out here to get your gunboats out of the way so he could proceed to attack the Slox home planets with minimal interference. The bombardment is probably underway right now."

"Lies!" Slith found his frail voice. "Okkyokk—he seeks to set

us at odds, each with the other!"

"I grateful you extreme, Terry!" the Slox commander grated in a voice like a steel girder shearing, ignoring Slith's appeal. "Preparation you for dead, Groaci bigshot! Fake up big war, eh, you tell. Make fool allbody, eh? Then join force and invasion Terries, eh? Fruits and nuts! You never delusion me for every! Hold on hats, kids—"

"Don't fire. The Soft One lies—as I can prove in most dramatic fashion—by blasting your cancerous aggreation of derelicts into their component atoms—"

"Retief—say something," Magnan yelped. "If they shoot—"

"Then you Soft Ones will die!" Slith piped. "If they prevail you die with my flagship—and if I prevail—then long shall you linger under the knives of my virtuosi!"

"How you plan do so big shoot with empty gun?" Okkyokk inquired warily.

"Retief!" Slith cried. "Confess to him you lied—else will I decree torments yet uninvented to adorn your passing!"

"Better open fire quickly—if you can," Retief said. "As for you, General," he addressed the screen, "it always pays to get in the first lick."

"Retief, what are you saying?" Magnan yelped. "Why goad them to this madness? No matter who wins, we lose!"

"My confuse!" Okkyokk stated. "Splendor idea, shoot up unarmed Five Eyes—but what if Terry big lying?"

"Don't let him get the jump on you, Slith," Retief advised.

"Gunnery Officer!" the Groaci commander piped in sudden, agonized decision. "All batteries—open fire."

The response was instantaneous. A series of hollow clicking wounds came over the intercom. They were followed by the dumfounded voice of the Gunnery officer.

"Exalted one—I regret to report—"

"Sabotage," Slith yelled.

On the screen Okkyokk paused, one digital member poised above a large puce button.

"How, no explosing? Gun fails operationing, just as Terry inform? Splendor!" the Slox leader waggled his ocular exterm- "Now time proceedure to extermination you with leisurely! Master Gunner—procedure blow picture window in Five Eyes flagship, give Commander Slith good viewing of eventuals!"

Slith hissed and sprang for the door, where he fought for position with the guards who had reached the portal before him. Magnan covered his ears and screwed his eyes shut.

"Whats?" Okkyokk's puzzled voice was coming from the screen. "Hows? Malfunctionate of firepower at times like these? My in-

tolerate! Caramba! Oh, heck!"

"I suggest both you gentlemen relax." Retief raised his voice slightly over the hubbub. "No one's going to do any shooting."

"So—your spies have infiltrated my flagship," Slith said. "Little will it avail you, Retief. Once in space, my most creative efforts will be lavished on your quivering corpori." He scrabbled on the rug, came up with his command mike. "Engineer—lift off, emergency crash procedures."

"Another disappointment in store, I'm afraid, Slith," Retief said as no surge of acceleration followed. "Herby's particularly sensitive to rocket blasts," he explained gently. "Ergo—no gunfire."

"Herby?" Slith keened, waggling his eyes from which the jeweled shields had fallen in the tussle. "Herby?"

"Herby," Okkyokk muttered. "What Herby, which?"

"Herby," Magnan gasped. "But —but—"

"Undone?" Slith whispered. "Trapped here by the treachery of the insidious Soft Ones? But briefly shall you gloat, my Retief."

The Groaci jerked an elaborately ornamented gun from the plastic holster at his bony hip, took aim.

"Three and out," Retief said as Slith stared in goggle-eyed paralysis at the small coral-toned flower growing from the barrel of the weapon. "Herby appreciates my conversation far too much to let you blow holes in me. Right, Herby?"

"Quite so, Retief," a cricket-sized voice chirped from the dainty blossom.

"My departure, golly whiz!" Okkyokk's voice blasted from the screen. "Navigationer—full fast ahead!"

"No use, General," Retief said. "Everybody's grounded. Your field windings are full of vines, I'm afraid."

"So that's why Renfrew couldn't leave." Magnan gulped. "I knew it all along, of course."

"What does this mean?" Slith whispered.

"It means you've been conquered single-handed by a population of one," Retief addressed the alien leaders. "So—if you're ready, gentlemen, I'm sure Herby will be willing to discuss the terms of your surrender."

"HEAVENS, Retief," Morgan said, adjusting the overlapping puce lapels of his top formal mid-morning cutaway in the gilt-framed mirror outside the impressive mahogany doors of the undersecretary for extraterrestrial affairs. "If we hadn't seized a moment to transmit a distress call on Slith's TX while Herby was busy taking the surrender, we might still be languishing in boredom on that dismal island."

"I doubt if we'd have been bored," Retief pointed out. "With several hundred grounded sailors roaming the woods and blaming us for their troubles."

"What a ghastly experience, with every bush and bough jabbering away in colloquial Slox and accentless Groaci, carrying on twelve hundred scrambled conversations at once!"

"In time I think Herby would have mastered the knack of segregating his dialogues," Retief said. "Even with a slice missing from that four-mile brain the soundings showed he should be a fast learner."

"He certainly mastered the technique of creative negotiation with record speed," Magnan agreed. "I can't help feeling a trifle sorry for poor Slith and Okkyokk—their fleets consigned to moulder on the ground, the while they supply teams of conversationalists in relays in perpetuity to entertain their conqueror."

Retief and Magnan turned as the elevator doors opened behind them. An orderly emerged, pushing a tea cart on which rested a handsome teak tub containing a tall, lily-like plant topped by a six-inch flower, glowing a healthy pink and yellow.

"Ah, gentlemen," the blossom greeted them in a mellow tenor voice. "I'm happy to report that new scenes seem to stimulate me —or at least this slice of me."

Magnan shuddered delicately.

"Imagine sprouting a bureaucrat from a wedge of frontal lobe," he said behind his hand. "It makes my head ache just to think of it.

A slender man with thick spectacles thrust his head from the secretarial suite.

"The secretary will see you now," he announced and held the door as the orderly wheeled the cart through.

"Mr. Secretary," Magnan said grandly, "I have the honor to present his excellency the Herbaceous Ambassador."

"Delighted to meet you, sir or madam," Thunderstroke rumbled, inclining his head graciously to the bloom, which nodded in reply. "Now—do tell me all the details of how you captured two fully armed war fleets—"

Retief and Magnan withdrew, leaving the undersecretary listening attentively to his visitor's account of the sapless victory.

"Lobotomy seems to agree with Herby," Magnan observed complacently. "Well, I must hurry along, Retief. I have a modest cutting I plan to infiltrate into the flower bed under the Groaci ambassador's window." He hurried off.

"Tsk," said a tiny voice from the pink buttoniere adorning Retief's topmost lapel. "The segment of me you left with the undersecretary is being regaled with a rath-

er gamy anecdote about cross-fertilizing tea-rose begonias. The punch line is—"

"It's not considered polite to listen in on private conversations, Herby," Retief pointed out.

"How can I help it?" the blossom protested. "After all, it's me he's talking to."

"Just don't repeat what you hear. Unless," Retief added as he strolled off toward the chancery bar, "it's something you think I really ought to know." ●

READING ROOM

(Continued from page 73)

All this is very well for a story of trickery and intrigue on a rather routine plotting level. But it has led us rather far from the early world that all the sections were emphasizing in the beginning. And the more we get away from that world of overcrowded and mad North America, the less use there is for the complex mechanism used to tell the story. Toward the end, I found the rewards far less than the effort needed.

The tensions inherent in the plot are also growing less. Norman's wanderings about in Beninia illustrate the point of its peacefulness; but they are as exciting as a description of his reading a book might be. And it seems curious that here we are back to simple narrative sections to handle what Brunner's complex of other sections was apparently designed to do earlier. Donald's efforts in Yatakang depend on good luck and otherwise might be any simple spy story, except that it ends in a rather dismal failure which doesn't seem to bother anyone except Donald, despite the urgency of his mission. Likewise the success of Norman's quest for the secret turns out to be a bit too simple and too unimpressive. I can't find any conviction that the inherent peace-creator of the Beninians would be any more contagious than the agression-creator of the rest of the world; and the aggressors far outnumber the Beninians. Too much build-up for too little a secret.

Anyhow, the secret is dug out by our old friend and iconoclast, Chad C. Mulligan. As a background commentator in the early part of the book, Mulligan has been an interesting personality. But Brunner yanks him onto the stage, where he becomes no more than a capable but unimpressive addition to the staff. As an iconoclast, he was interesting; as an ikon —a stone representation of his former self—he is nothing.

In the end the book becomes rather old-fashioned in its depiction of the future. Too much might be the background created

for an overpopulated world by a man writing his story in 1950. There is the yammering and semisane multitude and the crowding of the city; there is the drug scene; and there are a lot of touches that are good and well done, but too little below the surface of obviousness. Pollution, as an example, might as well not exist for its effect on the story. How the incredible future society has kept its industrial level so high with such a horde of people and not suffered what runaway pollution already faces us ten years from now is unclear. Beninia seems like a quaintly unpolluted little backward country from a novel of 1935; and Yatakang is aggressively industrialized to support its more than 200 million population without any evidence of being more polluted than Indonesia now.

Neither Norman nor David really does very much that we can see as evidence of growth, once they leave home (though Norman does grow earlier). They tend to adopt somewhat changed characters, but they weaken before our eyes. And the great development of Beninia and the handling of the danger of Yatakang in its world aggression are largely dismissed offhand.

In the end I think the experiment has failed to justify itself. Brunner has been caught up in his mechanisms and has let things happen to his story that such an excellent craftsman as he is would not have permitted in a straighter story.

It's still a novel worth reading for the promises in the earlier sections, but one which rates the raves it has received no more than it rated the harsh and totally unjust reviews it received in some of our daily press.

LORD TYGER, by Philip José Farmer (Doubleday, $5.95), is an experiment of an entirely different type. Farmer, through the many years of his contributions to our field, has been one of the boldest innovators. But there is no obvious mechanism or trickery to his book. It is told in straightforward prose and follows the course of his character's development about as directly and simply as is possible in this situation. The experiment here is simply in the honesty with which he has examined one of our hoariest and best beloved traditions.

Farmer is a devoted admirer of Edgar Rice Burroughs and has even translated Tarzan into Esperanto as a labor of love, essentially. But in this novel, he has taken a critical look at what would really happen to a man brought up as our heroic apeman was.

The result isn't science fiction, of course, though Doubleday labels the book as such. It's something that can only be categorized as a mixture of modern novel and adventure story. But since Farmer is a leading science-fiction writer

and since all the works of Burroughs, including the Tarzan novels, are so much a part of most readers' backgrounds, I felt it had to be read for review.

I can't fault Farmer's workmanship in this. He never belabors his point too strongly, and he does a remarkable job of accounting for most of the elements of Tyger, the man brought up to be Tarzan. Both Farmer's love of the original and his attempted honesty in this emerge victorious. Yet . . .

Essentially, this tells of the attempt by a multimillionaire Tarzan nut to prove Burroughs could have been right. The first attempt to get the kidnapped son of a minor English nobleman to be brought up by apes fails, and the child dies. The second attempt requires preparing the gorillas—the best we can do among real apes—to receive the child; but this results in what would surely happen—the child grows up half animal, unable to talk, in the image of the real "wolf-boys" that have been discovered.

The third attempt is more carefully staged. (The only fault with Farmer's logic seems to lie in managing to have all three boys kidnapped from the same parents!) A motley group of deformed or midget humans raises the boy, telling him they are apes (and enough different from his appearance to make him believe it). He's carefully taught to read in an old cabin, given a knife, etc. He runs across the village of black natives, all in due course. But there things begin to go agley. Instead of beating his chest and yelling Ka-Goda at them, he gets curious about girls, and then proceeds to satisfy his curiosity with almost every female of the village.

Eventually, he's forced to exterminate the village in true Tarzan style, but for his own reasons. And he is driven to looking for the god or demon who rules the isolated valley. Since his growth and training had to be observed, helicopter surveys had to be conducted; and he has seen the copters all his life. Now he begins to realize something must lie behind them.

Anyhow, eventually he is brought out into the great world beyond, where the papers make a fuss over him as a true "Tarzan." But his character has been shaped in ways that would hardly have made the real Tarzan of either book or screen acceptable to generations of followers. I have to admit that Farmer is probably correct in his depiction of Tyger's inevitable attitudes.

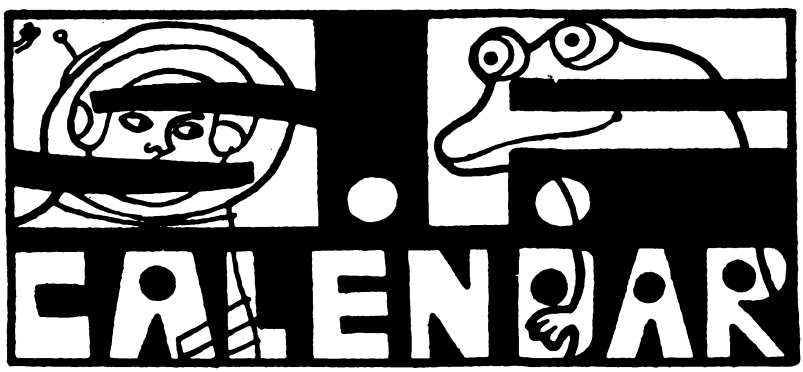
Yet, as I ellipsized before, something is missing. Somehow, while the character is generally true throughout and the situation is handled better than seemed possible, there is no fascination to the book. It's interesting reading as an exercise in the writer's ingenuity and skill, but it takes on no life of

its own, no feeling of interest in the basic character. Despite superb work at characterizing and developing Tyger, he sits in my mind dully and his moves do not grip me.

I'm afraid this experiment in concept is inherently a failure, though one I'm glad to have read.

Tarzan, as Burroughs saw him, was a fairy tale. When we open the pages of the book, the events that happen are only there to give us an excuse to wander through this part of fairyland. We have to transport ourselves there, and to see the landscape illumined by attitudes that have departed our familiar world of sixty years—and never really were a part of the life of our daily thought, but only of our literary postures.

You can't move fairyland into the real world; you have to go there in your mind, leaving our world behind. Long ago, another writer tried to be rational about what Helen of Troy really went through and it was talked about and forgotten, because it was a failure. Helen remains today the myth of human female desirability, never growing old; and Tarzan remains the myth of natural and hereditary nobility, never having license nor libido. ●



April 10-12, 1970 LUNACON/EASTERCON. At the Hotel McAlpin, Herald Square, New York City. Advance registration: $2.00. For information and registration—: Devra Langsam, 250 Crown Street, Brooklyn, New York 11225.

May 15-17, 1970. DISCLAVE. At the Skyline Inn, South Capitol and "Eye" Streets, S. W. Washington, D. C. 20024. Guest-of-honor: Will (Murray Leinster) Jenkins. For information: Jay Haldeman, 1244 Woodbourne Avenue, Baltimore, Md.

June 18-21, 1970. MULTICON-70. At the Skirvin Hotel, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Guests: Jim Harmon, R. A. Lafferty. Membership: $3.50. For information: David Smith, 133 Mercer Street, Ponca City, Oklahoma 74601.

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June 26-28, 1970. MIDWESTCON. At the Carrousel Inn, 8001 Reading Road. Cincinnati, Ohio. Programless Relaxacon. Banquet. For information: Lou Tabakow, 3953 St. Johns Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236.

•

June 29-*August* 7, 1970. CLARION WRITERS' WORKSHOP IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANtasy. Visiting lecturers: Samuel R. Delany, Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight, Fritz Leiber, Kate Wilhelm. Participants may register for two, four or six weeks. For information: Robin Scott Wilson, English Department, Clarion State College, Clarion, Pa.

•

July 3-5, 1970. WESTERCON XXIII. Will be held in Santa Barbara, California. Guest-of-Honor: Jack Williamson; Fan Guest-of-Honor: Rick Sneary. Memberships: $3.00 through June 22; $5.00 at the door. For information: Westercon XXIII. Box 4456, Downey, California 90241.

•

July 17-19, 1970. PgHLANGE. At Chatham Center Motor Lodge, Center Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Guest-of-Honor: Harlan Ellison; GoH Emeritus: Robert Silverberg. Features: Panels, parties, movies, banquet. Membership: $2.00 in advance; $2.50 at the door. For information: Suzanne Tompkins, 5830 Bartlett Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213.

•

August 14-16, 1970. AGACON 70. Memberships: Supporting, $1.50; Attending $2.50. For information: AGACON 70, Box 10885, Atlanta, Georgia 30310.

•

August 21-23, 1970. TORONTO FAN FAIR. At the King Edward Sheraton Hotel, Toronto, Canada. Guests-of-Honor: Anne McCaffrey, Isaac Asimov. Membership: $2.00 in advance. For information: Peter Gill, 18 Glen Manor Drive, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

•

August 21-24, 1970. 28th WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION: HEICON INTERNATIONAL. In Heidelberg, West Germany. The accent of this con will be an international one, with fans and pros coming from all over the world. Guest-of-Honor: Robert Silverberg (USA), Ted Tubb (England) and Dr. Herbert W. Franke (Germany). Memberships: $2.50 (supporting membership, receive all progress reports), $4.00 (attending); after December 31, $4.00, $6.00. For information and registration: HEICON 70, 6272 Niedernhausen, West Germany. Make all checks payable to Mrs. Molly Auler.

(Continued from page 3)

are now arriving on time, although occasionally in small quantity.

I hope that, when Worlds of Tomorrow *reappears, it has an adequate distribution here.*

Thank you.

Truly yours,
George Beile
Montreal, Canada

Dear Ejler:

GALAXY is beginning to look up with the February issue. SUNPOT was a disappointment though I have high hopes for it's improvement as anything by Bode has promise.

The issue was unusual in that there was no story I thought was bad, they were all very good; and two stories impressed with their great depth and richness. SLOW SCULPTURE for it's magnificent characterization was full of a warmth and humanity too many times lacking in SF. Too often writers use characters solely to explain the technology or to move the story with dialogue and action. Sturgeon is in love with his characters.

Terseness in writing is supposed to be the style these days but in THE LAST NIGHT OF THE FESTIVAL Dannie Plachta wrote a story beautiful in it's verbosity. Of course Gaugham's artwork contributed heavily to the atmosphere of the story. Finally your Associate Art director is turning out some of his Hugo award winning work for you.

Love and Peace,
Rick Stooker
Alton, Ill.

Dear Sir:

I finally received a Hand-Signed Reply from a publication—Galaxy! *For the last decade, any complaint to a publisher seems to have been directed again and again to a central computor which sends back formal cards having little or nothing to do with the problem. Since magazine and reader relations are a person-to-person thing, I am pleased that you have gotten away from the idea that a machine can do as good an overall job as a human in personal contacts. I speak from experiences with many publications. Evidently my key punch card has an irregular form, or the last name is too much for the typists. Practically every year, I did not receive one or more copies of IF. Writing did no good. No reply. Hope that this has changed.*

About your February cover—As usual, Gaughan does a good job, but this cover belongs to "Pressure Vessel" and not to "Whipping Star" as is stated in your table of contents.

Sincerely,
Ed Pokropus
IF-154

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S-1

NONE BUT MAN by Gordon R. Dickson. Aliens from Moldaug, inhuman stars from the last human settlement, are gathering together for war. Old world inhabitants are willing to sacrifice the new world colonies in order to avert this war. But not rugged individualist Cully When, the type of man who has pioneered frontiers in all times and all places. Set in some future time, this action-filled adventure depicts space-age guerrilla warfare and age-old human stupidity with excitement and ends with an explosive climax.

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S-3

BUG JACK BARRON by Norman Spinrad. Explore the edge of tomorrow...who will be chosen for immortality? Who will make this ultimate decision—the government, free enterprise, or private monopoly? A new, highly controversial novel, infused with blood and guts, examining the disease of power as well as the responsibility. Both praised and damned before it was even published, this novel deserves your personal attention.

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THE POLLINATORS OF EDEN by John Boyd. From the Planet of the Flowers, Dr. Freda Caron's fiancé Paul has sent her an exquisite iridescent yellow tulip that not only has a plastic memory—but can talk. Freda realizes that she must unlock the secrets of the flower planet and its strange hold on Paul. In this exciting new book, Freda must travel from her ultra-rational world-of-tomorrow to explore the strange, unearthly flower planet. The climax of this shocking and oddly beautiful novel is bizarre and delightful.

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S-5

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS by John Wyndham. For an entire day, a small rural village in England loses contact with the outside world. Soon after, all the women, married or not become pregnant, eventually giving birth to remarkable golden-eyed children who exhibit a strange kind of sinisterism. They are dangerous and Midwich must make the ultimate decision—if the children survive, then mankind must join the dinosaur among Nature's discards. A gripping account of man's fight for survival.

189 pp. List Price...$4.50 Discount Price...$4.05

S-6

THE SPACE MERCHANTS by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. Two major advertising agencies are fighting for the Venus account—nothing less than total control of the Venus economy and markets will do. It is completely unimportant that Venus is a harsh, barren, uninhabited planet. According to the mentality of Mitchell Courtenay of Fowler Schocken Associates, the trick is to persuade colonists to go to Venus, and once there, they will have to survive as best they can. One of the most savage and devastating attacks on modern consumer society and the advertising agents who are its high priests, *The Space Merchants* is uncomfortably prophetic.

158 pp. List Price...$4.50 Discount Price...$4.05

S-7

BRAIN WAVE by Poul Anderson. Imagine, some mysterious space force that inhibits the world's intelligence. But suddenly, it's gone and overnight the intellect of every living creature is trebled. What are the consequences of such instant genius? These are the problems confronting Archie Brock, former near moron; Peter Corinth, physicist; and his no-longer dumb wife. This provocative and absorbing book explores the ultimate problem of such a situation—in a world free of the difficulties that has plagued mankind throughout history, what is man to do with his time?

164 pp. List Price...$4.50 Discount Price...$4.05

S-8A

OPUS 100 by Isaac Asimov. An event—a special Asimov book...America's foremost science writer, takes you on a personalized guided tour of his first 99 books. This, his 100th book, is an anthology of works selected by the author himself. It is a journey which acquaints the reader with a writer considered to be a genius, who delights in every aspect of life and has the capacity to make any subject he writes about both understandable and entertaining. Reviewers customarily greet Asimov publications with such adjectives as "brilliant," "engrossing," "powerful," and "sparkling." *Opus 100* is no exception.

318 pp. List Price...$5.95 Discount Price...$5.36

S-9

THE PAST THROUGH TOMORROW, Robert A. Heinlein's Future History Stories. Twenty-five years ago Robert A. Heinlein began to write stories about an imaginary future that is fast becoming a reality. Discover, through the pen of the master of space-age fiction, about man's first step on the moon; weather control; manufacture of synthetic food; interstellar exploration. Now, for the first time, in chronological order, are Heinlein's 21 compelling stories—all depicting a glimpse of a possible tomorrow.

667 pp. List Price...$6.95 Discount Price...$6.26

S-10

THORNS by Robert Silverberg. Duncan Chalk, master pain peddler, skillful and sophisticated, lives in a time when reading tragic headlines no longer provides the necessary sensations. Into Chalk's sinister hands falls Lona Kelvin, orphaned, mother of 100 children, yet without a soul; and Minner Burris, starman, whose butchered body was put together by aliens, a walking horror. What fun to mate these two and watch them wallow in their mutual torment. But somewhere, something went wrong. Discover what happens when the puppets begin to pull their own strings in this imaginative, chilling book.

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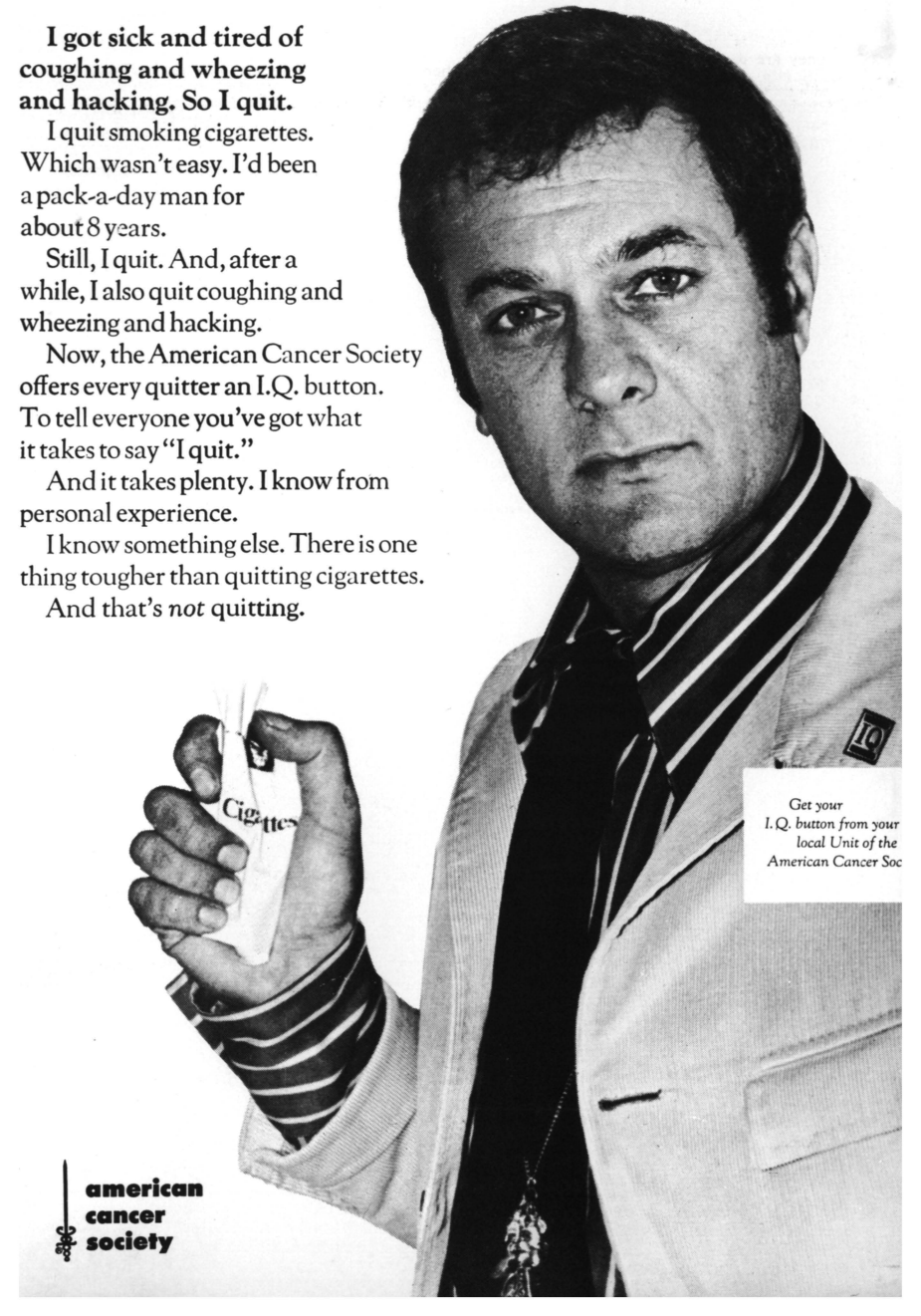

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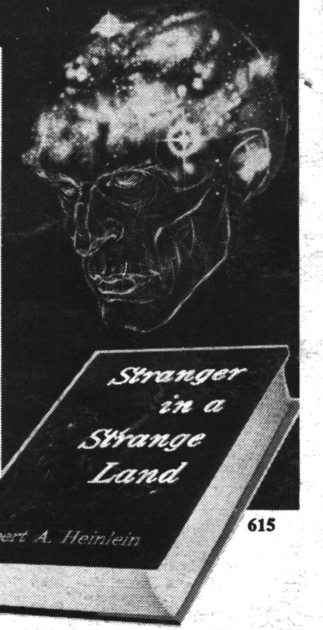

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